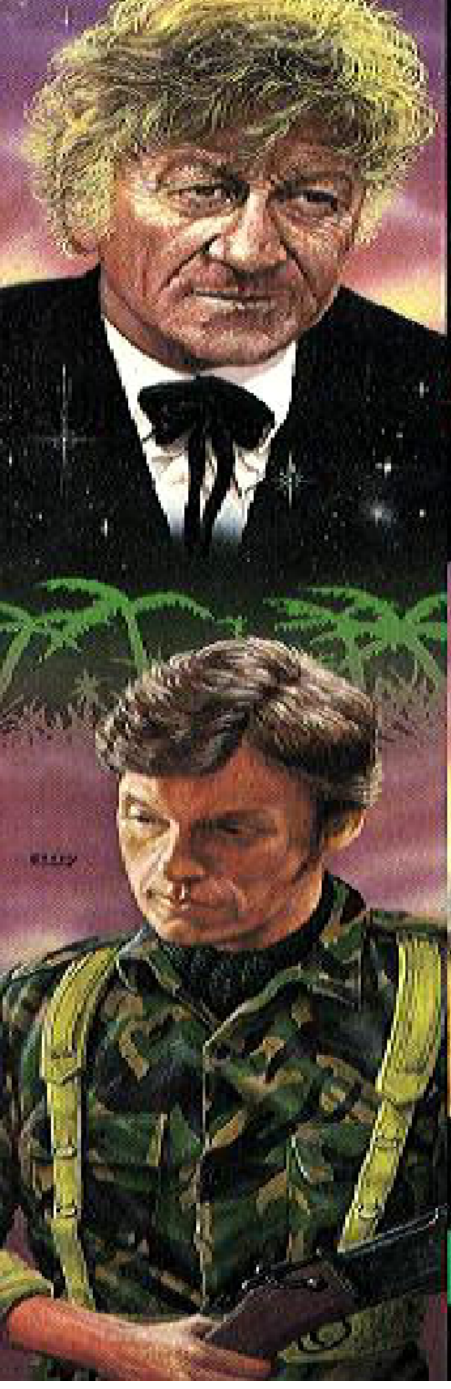


DOCTOR WHO

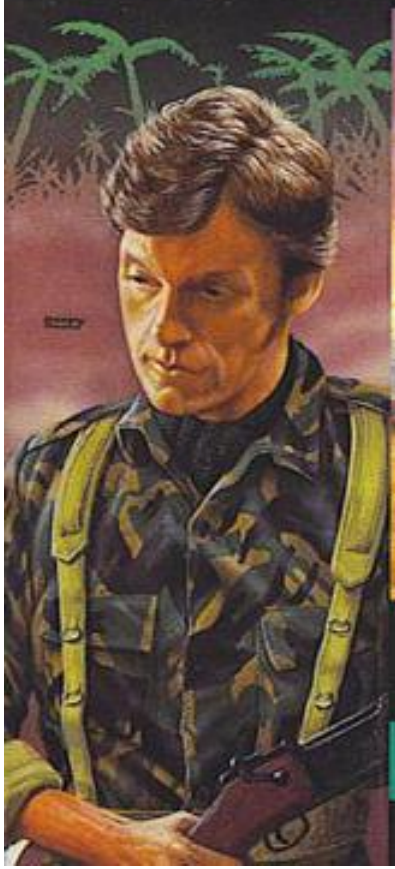
THE MISSING ADVENTURES

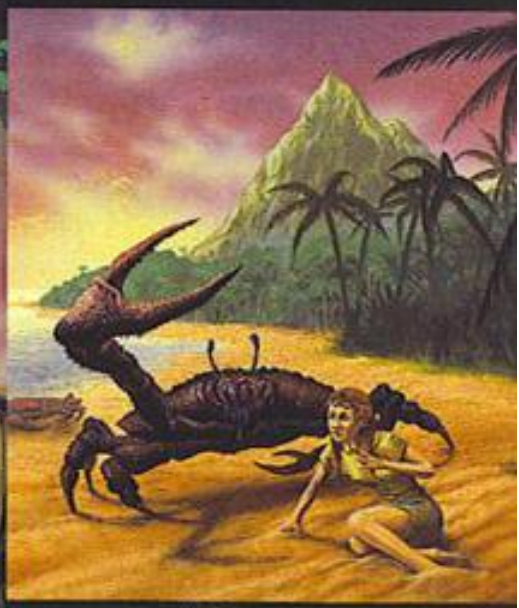
THE EYE OF THE GIANT

CHRISTOPHER BULIS

DOCTOR WHO

THE MISSING ADVENTURES





THE EYE OF THE GIANT

CHRISTOPHER BULIS

T H E E Y E O F T H E G I A N T

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL FEATURING THE THIRD DOCTOR, LIZ

SHAW, MIKE YATES AND UNIT.

‘I MIGHT HAVE KNOWN IT,’ THE BRIGADIER SAID TERSELY.

‘THE DOCTOR AND MISS SHAW HAVE MANAGED TO LOSE

THEMSELVES ON AN ISLAND THAT DOESN’T EXIST.’

1934: Salutua, a legendary lost island in the Pacific. Millionaire Marshal J Grover’s expedition arrives to uncover and exploit its secrets. But the task is complicated by a film star’s fears and ambitions and a scientist’s lethal obsession.

Nearly forty years later: UNIT headquarters, London. The Doctor and Liz Shaw are asked to identify a mysterious artifact and trace its origin. The trail leads them back in time to Salutua and a gigantic discovery. Meanwhile, the Brigadier faces and epidemic of UFO sightings and supernatural occurrences that threaten to bring about global panic. Only the Doctor can help him — but he’s trapped on a mythical island four decades in the past.

This adventure takes place between the television stories

INFERNO *and* ***TERROR OF THE AUTONS****.*

Christopher Bulis *has writeen three previous Doctor Who books, including the highly acclaimed* ***The Sorcerer’s Apprentice****.*

ISBN 0 426 20469 7

THE EYE OF THE

GIANT

Christopher Bulis

First published in Great Britain in 1996 by Doctor Who Books

an imprint of Virgin Publishing Ltd

332 Ladbroke Grove

London W10 5AH

Copyright © Christopher Bulis 1996

The right of Christopher Bulis to be identified as the Author of this Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

'Doctor Who' series copyright © British Broadcasting Corporation 1996

ISBN 042 6204 697

Cover illustration by Paul Campbell

Typeset by TV/ Typesetting, Plymouth, Devon Printed and bound in Great Britain by

Mackays of Chatham PLC

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemnblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior written consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Contents

Prologue

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Ten

Eleven

Twelve

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty-One

Twenty-Two

Twenty-Three

Twenty-Four

Twenty-Five

Twenty-Six

Prologue

With a sudden brilliant coruscation of violently discharged energy, two vessels tumbled out of the abstract reality of hyperspace and into the ecliptic plane of a yellow star system.

The smaller of the pair, a dull black egg, fired again, but the plasma bolt flared harmlessly off the force shield of the larger, silver grey globe. The black egg applied full power to its drive in an attempt to flee its relentless pursuer, but some invisible force seemed to hold it back. A scintillating annulus of crackling blue flame appeared in the blackness between the warring craft, as the egg's pilot tried to shear through the tractor beam. But the beam held, and slowly, inexorably, the distance between the two decreased.

Suddenly the egg turned about.

Its main drive, which had a moment before been striving to escape the tractor beam, now added its force to the vector of attraction. As the egg plunged recklessly towards the globular craft, it cut loose its entire remaining battery of weapons at maximum power and rate of fire. A bouquet of plasma bolts blossomed against the other's shield, and a rapier-thin lance of blue flame lashed out to blaze against the immaterial barrier, flickering as it probed for the frequency window through which the tractor beam passed.

Fearing that the egg's pilot intended to sell his life dearly by attempting to crash his vessel through their shield, the occupants of the globe reversed the polarity of their beam, converting it into a repeller. But as the beam changed, the frequency of the operating window adjusted to match, and, for a split second, a gap opened in the shield. And, for an even smaller fraction of time, the frequency of

the attacking beam matched that gap. In that instant, the beam flared into eye-searing overload then died, its projector burned out. But it had been long enough.

Intolerable energy lashed across the globe's hull. Even its thick shell of stressed and toughened ceramic could not withstand such temperature. Nothing material could. A long gash vaporized and boiled away, opening the interior of the globe to space. A jet of fluid erupted through the breech, condensing into a plume of sparkling crystals. The rent in the suddenly unequally stressed hull opened further, then the whole craft split open like a bursting balloon under massive internal pressure. Power cells shorted out and exploded with crackling flashes of artificial lightning, wreaking further havoc. An expanding cloud of misty vapour swelled into space, carrying with it shattered debris from the ship's interior and the shapeless forms of the creatures that had been its crew, their bodies ruptured and bloated by explosive decompression.

Through the cloud flew the surviving craft, dodging frantically to avoid the larger fragments. Then it passed out into open space again and was clear.

Brokk watched on the main screen as the image of the cloud fell away behind him, and, with relief, lowered his own force shield. He glanced at the insulated locker containing the precious package, and thought of the price he would get for its contents on a certain world he knew. Yes, it had been worth the risk. That transaction would set him up for life. Now, all he had to do was recharge his systems for re-entry to hyperspace –

An alarm sounded.

Brokk's hand flashed towards the force field switch a fraction too late.

The craft shook as an explosion destroyed his hyperdrive unit. Torn fragments of hull panelling twinkled briefly across the monitors before fading away into the blackness.

Even as Brokk wrestled with the stabilizers, forcing his craft back on an even keel, he realized what had hit him and cursed the Semquess's tenacity. It had been a retribution missile, triggered by the demise of the mother ship and ejected clear even as it was destroyed. It had been programmed to attack when his guard was down. But then, why was he not dead? Of course! It was designed specifically to destroy his hyperdrive, to disable, not kill. The Semquess still wanted what he

had intact, if possible. He could be sure that even now another of their ships was homing in on the last transmission of the lost craft. And they would have little difficulty finding him. Even if they did not arrive for several dex, the distance he could travel through real space in that time was insignificant.

Unless he could hide, of course.

Cautiously, he set his instruments scanning the system into which the Semquess's attack had precipitated him. The results were not promising. There was only one tolerable planet orbiting close to the central star, and it was at least six dex's travel away. As he debated whether to risk the journey, there came an ominous creaking from the hull, and several warning lights began to flicker on his control console. That missile had done more damage than he had thought. He needed to make some sort of landfall quickly for repairs. But where? There was one world relatively close by. It was part of a twin planet system, within a dex's travel, which he had initially dismissed out of hand because he would need a full life-support suit to survive on it. Even its cold but airless lesser companion was more inviting, as no Grold would willingly set down on such a high gravity world so far from its sun, and bathed in a thick, murky, freezing atmosphere. But then, perhaps the Semquess would reason that way as well...

Another warning creak decided him. As he set course, meters showed that the cabin pressure was dropping. He cursed again as he put on a breathing mask and turned up the heaters. He would need to be fully suited before daring even to enter the planet's atmosphere, for he could not risk coming in direct contact with that freezing, heat absorbent muck.

Never mind! It would not be comfortable, but he would find some remote place and conceal himself while he made repairs.

He would survive.

That was the Grold way.

Brokk looked again at the locker and thought of what it contained. He would never let the Semquess have them back.

They were his prize, hard earned. After all, he'd stolen them, hadn't he?

One

ight fathoms and shelving...'

'E The cry of the linesman on the prow drifted back to the small group lining the starboard rail of the *Constitution III*.

Distantly they heard the bridge telegraph ring, and the throbbing note of the engines slowed and deepened. Amelia Grover held her breath as the big yacht edged towards the gap in the reef. It was uncomfortably narrow, and the *Constitution* had a broader beam than the usual slender island schooner. In compensation, of course, no schooner had such horsepower at its disposal.

She saw Nancy Norton (she always thought of her by her screen name, never as her stepmother bearing the family name), eyes wide with affected alarm, cling to her father, encouraging him to put a reassuring arm around her as she rested her improbably blonde head against his shoulder.

Nancy was good at clinging to people when it suited her, Amelia had noted. It was probably some of her better acting.

'Are you sure we can make it, Mr Grover?' asked Lawrence de Veer queasily, gripping the rail firmly against the increasing pitch and roll of the ship, his voice rising over the slap of water against the hull and the steady background boom and roar of waves breaking over several miles of coral reef. Once, when Amelia had visited Paragon Studios, shortly after her father had bought them, she had seen de Veer directing Nancy in a few scenes of a film. She had thought of him then as being terribly autocratic and domineering. Now he just looked slightly sea-sick.

'Pascoe's the best captain I ever had,' her father growled back. 'He'll get us through.' He glanced at Amelia. 'You're not worried are you, Amy?'

''Course I'm not, Pa,' Amelia reassured him.

With a scowl Grover did not see, Nancy gently disentangled herself from his arm and stood straight by his side again, just to show she could be as unconcerned as anybody else. Around them white water frothed about the coral heads as they played their treacherous game of peek-a-boo in the Pacific swell, which, even this close to land, Amelia knew could silently snatch two or three fathoms of clear water from under the keel without warning.

Beside her, Michael Montgomery, Paragon's most famous leading man,

peered curiously over the rail and blanched visibly at the sight. His handsome if now slightly puffy features contorted into a grimace, and he tottered back theatrically, reaching for his familiar hip flask as though inviting sympathy at his discomfiture. Amelia liked him least at such moments. She had once had a juvenile crush on him, years ago, when his face had peered out of so many posters and billboards. The reality of observing him at close quarters for the two weeks they had been at sea had dispelled any lingering fascination, leaving a wistful sadness in its wake.

The two remaining figures by the rail, Amelia noticed, appeared to be immune to the potential danger of their situation.

Hubert Dodgeson, a senior studio cameraman, had temporarily relinquished his movie camera for a compact Lieca, with which he was now enthusiastically recording their passage through the reef. Even as Amelia watched, he leant dangerously over the rail and snapped away happily, his spectacles pushed back on to his forehead, his normal reticence quite absent for the moment.

Professor Sternberg, in his perpetually crumpled tropical whites, seemed for his part to be too intent on their goal to be concerned about their immediate situation. He gazed eagerly ahead, mopping his brow with a sweat-stained handkerchief.

Perhaps two miles away across the sheltered lagoon, Salutua lay like an emerald gem stone, mounted on the encircling band of the reef that embraced it. Around the island, the sapphire blue of the Pacific shaded through cerulean into turquoise, and the sudden white gold intensity of the scalloped line of beaches was presided over by the inevitable fringe of nodding palm trees. A thick mantle of verdure covered all the island, save only for the truncated summit of its highest peak, from which trailed a thin streamer of steam and smoke. Amelia saw an expression of wonder and hope flit across Sternberg's face as he took in the panorama.

'Are we through yet?' Montgomery enquired plaintively, his eyes cast very deliberately heavenward, clutching his flask like a talisman.

'Just about, Mr Montgomery,' Dodgeson replied, as he wound on his camera. 'Hey, what's that –'

There came the tremor of an impact.

The ship rolled and its prow lifted, as though it were riding over some smooth solid body, and they staggered to keep upright. There was a

groan of metal. Something exploded below the water line almost underneath them, driving a shock wave through the ship's frame that smacked the deck against their feet and sent a waterspout thirty feet into the air, showering them with spray. The *Constitution* pitched and wallowed. An alarm bell clanged. They could hear orders being shouted from the bridge and there came the pounding of running feet as seamen scrambled to their posts. The ship settled, but with a slight list to starboard.

' *Mein Gott*! We are sinking!' Sternberg choked wildly.

'Keep a grip on yourself, man!' Grover commanded.

Nancy was clinging to him in genuine alarm now, and for once Amelia could not blame her. She found her own hand automatically reaching for the tiny silver crucifix she wore round her neck. 'Everybody, let's stay out of the crew's way,'

Grover continued. 'They know their jobs. Fetch some life preservers from the locker over there. Girls, I want you to put them on just in case...'

David Ferraro, the *Constitution*'s first officer, half slid down the companionway from the bridge even as the beat of the motors rose and the yacht began to make way again. His handsome, slightly hard latin features broke into an unaccustomed smile of relief when he saw they were all unharmed.

'What's going on, Ferraro?' Grover asked quickly.

'We've been holed below the water line, Mister Grover.

The pumps are going and we're trying to plug it. Skipper requests you all stand by a lifeboat but don't board yet. If he can beach us before we take on too much water we should be okay.'

'Understood. Do what you have to. Don't worry about us.'

Ferraro headed for the lower deck.

Amelia watched as the island grew larger with agonizing slowness while the list increased perceptibly. Her father squeezed her hand reassuringly. In response, Nancy pressed closer to Grover, no doubt feeling that as a second wife, even if of only a few months' standing, she took precedence. A look of dismay suddenly crossed her flawlessly made-up face and set her minutely plucked eyebrows arching.

‘Marshal – my jewel case. It’s in the cabin. I must get it.’

‘Never mind about that now, Honey. Nobody’s going to their cabins if they don’t have to until we’re safely beached, just in case. I can always buy you more diamonds.’

For the next minute it was oddly silent, except for the throb of the engines and distant shouted orders from below. Miss Ellis, Grover’s mousy, unassuming and indispensable secretary, calmly appeared in their midst beside Grover. She was already wearing a life jacket and carried her father’s personal valise. Amelia smiled at her in relief. Nothing ever seemed to ruffle Miss Ellis’s calm.

Meanwhile, Sternberg fretted over the ties of his life jacket.

‘Don’t worry, Prof,’ said Montgomery amiably, the contents of the hip flask having apparently served their purpose. ‘Abandoning ships’s no problem. Done it myself a dozen times. Sometimes even with the ship on fire, and twice in the Arctic. ’Least the water’s warm here.’

‘Yes, yes!’ Sternberg snapped back at him nervously.

‘Your so wonderful play-acting on the motion picture screen I have seen. But I have also seen what can happen to men in warm waters such as these, if there are sharks present!’

‘Sharks!’ Montgomery tottered for a moment, then appeared to gather fresh resolution. ‘Doesn’t matter. In *Master of the Spanish Main* I killed one with my bare hands!

Remember that, de Veer? You directed. Damn fine picture…’

‘Montgomery, shut up!’ the director retorted.

The shoreline seemed to crawl closer with agonizing slowness, even though the *Constitution* was surging across the lagoon at full speed. They could hear the muffled sounds of the repair party working furiously below decks, but the list was still increasing.

‘Pa,’ Amelia said quietly. ‘Do you think we should move over to the port rail – just in case?’

Nancy’s eyes widened at the implication, giving Amelia a brief, guilty glow of pleasure. ‘We’re going to turn over!’

‘No, Honey,’ Grover insisted placatingly. ‘She won’t turn turtle on us.

Amy's just being cautious. She's a good ship.

We're going to make it. Look, we're nearly there. Brace yourselves...'

Suddenly a stretch of white beach seemed to rush towards them. At the last minute they heard the Captain ring all stop.

Momentum carried them onwards. They surged through the rolling waves and struck with a hissing rush, throwing up a plume of spray and sand. The prow gouged into the sand with a groaning of tortured hull plates. But the shallow contour of the beach saved them from further damage, slowing them gradually, and, with a slight judder, the *Constitution* ground to a halt.

For a moment it was amazingly quiet on the brilliantly sunlit shore, except for the whisper of a light breeze disturbing the palm fronds, and the distant call of a bird from somewhere deeper inland. The lush smell of green plants and scented blossoms wafted across them, underlain with the rank taint of decay.

The yacht had ridden half out of the water, sitting almost perfectly upright laterally, but five or six degrees off vertical along the keel line. Hidden by the curve of the hull, water gushed back out on to the sand from the breach that had come so close to sinking them. Even as they gathered their wits and felt relief dawning, orders were shouted and the crew began to swing the railed steps of the accommodation ladder over the yacht's side and lower the free end to the sand. An inspection crew rapidly began to muster at its head.

'I'm going below to have a look at the damage and talk to Pascoe,' said Grover, shedding his life jacket. 'You'd better all wait in the saloon.'

'Fine idea,' Montgomery asserted. 'I could do with a drink.' For once everybody agreed with him.

Amelia felt secure inside the saloon of the *Constitution*. Most of the memories associated with it were good ones. It was long, spacious and amply supplied with low, comfortable club chairs, recliners and card tables. The thick piled carpet was further overlaid by a scattering of oriental rugs. Curios gathered from all over the Pacific and mounted photographs of several ships adorned the walls, including a picture of the *Constitution* when it was just a humble light freighter: the first ship Grover had ever owned outright. This was before the refit which extended her superstructure and cabin space, and turned her into the mobile office and private yacht of the president of the Greater Pacific

and Oriental Shipping Company. Framed movie posters were more recent additions to the gallery, several of which featured likenesses of Nancy and Montgomery in starring roles. Beside them was an aerial photograph of a complex of cavernous, hangar-like buildings, inscribed: PARAGON FILM STUDIOS - JANUARY 1934.

One corner of the room contained a compact but comprehensive bar, with glittering rows of bottles and glasses securely restrained behind brass rails. It was to this that Montgomery automatically gravitated, casting an anxious, paternal eye over its contents to ensure nothing had been damaged. Apparently satisfied, he took on his self-appointed role as barman and proceeded amiably to distribute restoratives to the rest of the company. He even remembered Amelia's alcohol free fruit juice cocktail, which she had to admit he mixed well. She did not approve of his drinking, or his other rumoured habits, but at least he never challenged her own faith and abstinence.

De Veer observed the actor's loving and skilful manipulation of the drink mixing paraphernalia. 'How in heaven did you survive Prohibition, Montgomery?' he enquired.

Montgomerey raised his glass in a convivial salute. 'By knowing the address of every speakeasy in five states and never drawing an entirely sober breath for fourteen years,' he declared simply.

Dodgeson had seated himself beside Sternberg, looking thoughtful as he put his camera back in its case. Amelia heard him say curiously:

'I'm sure I saw something odd in the water just before we hit whatever it was. Some kind of large round ball.'

Sternberg paused in his apparently habitual brow mopping.

'Ach, what are you saying? You mean a mine left over from the Great War? What would one be doing here?'

'No, it was far too smooth.'

'Then it must have been a brain coral. They can grow two metres across – six or eight feet – I have seen.'

Dodgeson continued to look doubtful.

Her father and Miss Ellis entered, she calmly taking down his brisk instructions on her shorthand pad as though they had just docked in Honolulu. Everybody turned expectantly towards him.

‘Right, here’s how things stand,’ he began in his gruff, straightforward way. ‘We’re safe enough for the moment,

’long as we don’t mind the deck being out of level. But there’s a hole in the hull nearly three feet across, and some internal damage, which is going to take maybe a couple of days to fix.’

‘Any idea what caused it, Pa?’ Amelia asked.

‘It wasn’t a coral spur, that’s for sure, Amy. Looks more like an explosion, except there’s no scorching or powder marks.’

‘But even if the repairs are successful, can we get afloat again?’ de Veer asked anxiously. ‘Shouldn’t we radio for help?’

‘We’ll be fixed up again before anybody could reach us,’

Grover assured him. ‘High tide and the winch’ll get us free, de Veer, don’t worry.’ He frowned. ‘Besides, we can’t call for help. The radio’s out of order. Picking up nothing but static.’

‘Did the impact damage it, Mr Grover?’ Dodgeson asked.

‘No. It happened before we reached the reef. The operator was just going to tell Pascoe about it when that blast hit us.’

‘Could this failure be connected with that most unusual phenomena we passed through earlier?’ Sternberg wondered, but Nancy interrupted his speculations.

‘I don’t care, I just want to go home as soon as possible!’

she snapped petulantly. ‘This place is going to be a miserable waste of time, full of mosquitoes and bugs and snakes. Why can’t we film in the studios, Marshal?’

Grover looked uncomfortable. ‘You know why we think Salutua is special, Nancy. If we’re right, we can get some footage here that you couldn’t fake up in any studio. It’ll be spectacular! The film of the century! And you’ll be the star.’

Nancy stood up and smoothed down her dress very deliberately. ‘I can do better than being a secondhand Fay Wray!’ she retorted haughtily, and flounced out.

There was an awkard silence. De Veer rose. ‘Don’t worry, Mr Grover. I’ll have a word with her. She’ll come round.’

And he followed Nancy out.

‘If you don’t need me for anything else, sir?’ Miss Ellis murmured, and departed silently.

‘I’d better check on my cameras,’ Dodgeson muttered to nobody in particular, and slipped away in turn.

Sternberg spoke up. He had risen and was peering intently out of the saloon windows at the line of palm trees and the thick forest rising behind them. ‘Well, I for one am grateful to be here at last, Mr Grover. We have had a mishap, that is all.

A few repairs are needed. But we came prepared to stay for two, three weeks, so what is that?’ His eyes gleamed. ‘I wish to begin my researches as soon as possible.’

‘Remember not to go inland without an armed escort, Professor. Like we agreed,’ Grover reminded him.

‘Naturally, I shall not take foolish risks, you may be sure.

But there are several hours of daylight left, and I do not want to waste any time.’ He gestured dramatically. ‘Who knows what discoveries await us?’ Then he seemed to realize where he was, glanced around almost guiltily, and walked quickly out.

‘Well said, Prof.’ Montgomery applauded the departing figure, then turned to Grover. ‘Don’t worry about me, old man,’ he said reassuringly. ‘As long as the bar’s open you won’t hear any complaints from this direction. Just let me know if there’s an early call tomorrow.’ He wove his way out in the direction of his cabin, leaning against the slope of the deck.

Left alone with her father, Amelia wondered once again if she should try to encourage him to take a firmer hand with Nancy. The woman behaved like a selfish, spoiled child sometimes, as everybody else could plainly tell. But it was one of his few blind spots. And Nancy, for all her faults, did seem to make him happy most of the time. There had been years, after her mother’s death, when Amelia thought he would never smile or laugh again. So instead, she simply took his hand and kissed his forehead where his hair was starting to recede.

‘Why, Pa,’ she said lightly, ‘I know you wanted to get me away from ‘Frisco for a change, but did you have to maroon me on a desert island to do it?’

Grover chuckled. ‘Ah, you caught me out there, Amy. Now you know the truth. Still, it looks like you’ll have to put up with it for a few days, anyway.’

‘Looks like it,’ she agreed brightly. ‘So I suppose I’d better check that Mister Chow isn’t throwing an oriental fit again, and he has everything straight in his galley. Otherwise we’ll all have to live on coconuts, and I think that would be taking things a little far, don’t you?’

Marshal J. Grover watched his daughter leave the saloon with loving, yet sad eyes.

As always, the sleeve of her blouse was folded and pinned up neatly, where her left arm was missing from just above the elbow.

‘I’d do anything for you, Amy,’ he murmured to himself.

Two

ergeant Mike Yates examined the documentation Saccompanying the security sealed container with interest, while the armed military courier loomed over him, stoically waiting for his receipt.

The container itself, sitting on the main gate guardroom desk, was liberally plastered with permit numbers and transportation orders, which had allowed it to travel half way round the world with official sanction. Stark black and yellow radiation warning stickers added ominous splashes of colour to the collection. The actual description of its contents, however, was a masterpiece of minimally informative succinctness and brevity: ‘One artifact – origin unknown’.

This phrase caused Mike to pause in the act of checking the paperwork and raise an amused eyebrow, but he made no further comment. After all, UNIT specialized in the unknown.

Mike signed the final receipt with a flourish and handed it over. The military messenger saluted perfunctorily, and returned to his unmarked, nondescript delivery van, parked in the basement car park with its peeling whitewashed walls. The engine growled into life and the vehicle drove out through the gate of the equally nondescript building in a quiet London backstreet. UNIT’s British headquarters had a slightly run down but genteel air about it, suggesting that it belonged to one of the less prestigious civil service departments, and hardly worth a second glance from any passer-by. Which was precisely the desired effect, of course.

Somewhat gingerly, Mike carried the package upstairs to the Brigadier's office. In the corridor outside it he found John Benton, at present UNIT's only other sergeant, standing quietly holding a sheaf of day reports, and trying not to look as though he was aware of the rising murmur of the one-sided conversation taking place on the other side of the door. There was a broad grin over his good-humoured features.

'Has he got someone in there?' Mike whispered, joining Benton.

'No, he's on the phone. Tearing a strip off some Whitehall warrior. For all the good it'll do.'

'What's it about?'

'Money, of course. What you got there?'

'A mystery present from the antipodes.'

'Eh?'

'Something our Australian section thought we might be interested in.'

'Well we'd better not have to pay for the return postage, that's all...Ah, there he goes.'

With some final cutting remarks, delivered in unmistakably exasperated tones, there came the clatter of a receiver being replaced firmly on its cradle. Mike saw Benton silently counting to ten, then cautiously knock on the door and enter.

Brigadier Alastair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart was clearly not in a good mood. His moustache bristled and his brow furrowed. He glared at the new arrivals.

'Well?' he demanded.

'Just the routine reports, sir,' said Benton quickly, depositing the papers in a tray and making a hasty withdrawal, leaving Mike in the firing line.

'What on earth have you got there, Yates? It's not Christmas already, is it?'

'No, sir. Canberra sent this over thinking we might be able to tell them what it is.' Mike handed over the explanatory document which had accompanied the container, and the Brigadier read it through rapidly.

As he did so his expression changed from annoyance to mild amusement.

'Well I must say that's a novel place for it to turn up.' He chuckled. 'And now they can't make head nor tail of it, so they've passed it on to us. Oh well, I suppose the Doctor and Miss Shaw can take a look at it.'

'The Doctor, sir?' Mike repeated, with interest.

'You've seen him about haven't you, Yates?'

'Only in passing, sir. I've *heard* about him quite a bit, naturally, but I haven't had much to do with him directly.'

'Of course, you've been heading the clean-up squad so far.

What do you think of the work?'

'Well, it has its moments. But, speaking frankly, sir, scouring the countryside for leftover fragments of Autons or cave lizard devices, and trying to keep too many people from realizing what *really* happened as you go – it's not exactly what I expected.'

'So you want to see a little more front line action?'

Mike looked uncomfortable. The Brigadier smiled understandingly.

'Nothing to be ashamed of, Yates – if you're up to it...' He subjected the lean, intense young sergeant to a moment's thoughtful scrutiny, then appeared to reach a decision. 'Pull up a chair,' he directed. Mike did so, and the Brigadier looked at him seriously. 'Do you know who I was just talking to on the phone?'

'No, sir.'

'Sir John Sudbury of C-19. He acts as financial liaison between us and the government. I was trying to find out why my request for an additional allocation so that we can at least have a captain on our strength again, has been turned down. I was informed that "in the present financial climate" we would have to make do with what we've got.' He glowered. 'Most unsatisfactory, but there it is.'

'We'll manage, sir.'

'I hope so, Yates. You'd think that after half a dozen confirmed attempts by alien forces to invade Earth, in addition to certain other incidents, that the only organization specifically set up to counter such

threats would receive adequate funding. But apparently, between UN budgetary wrangling and British bureaucracy, that is not so. While the politicians can keep the full truth from the population at large, they seem to think they can treat our finances along with the indents for next year's supply of paper clips!'

Mike had rarely seen his commanding officer so angry.

Feeling that something was expected of him, he said brightly:

'Then we'll just have to make up in quality what we lack in quantity, won't we, sir?'

The Brigadier smiled tightly. 'Quite so, Yates. Which means additional responsibility is going to fall on Benton and yourself. So you'd better become thoroughly familiar with all aspects of UNIT's functions. And you may as well start with our scientific team. Bring that parcel along and you can meet them properly.'

With the exception of the totally incongruous police telephone box standing in one corner, the high-ceilinged laboratory with its tall, square-paned windows, - and shelves and cabinets full of electronic equipment and bottles of chemicals, reminded Mike a little of a certain school science lab that he had spent many uncomfortable hours in some years before, goggling uncomprehendingly at the abstruse formulas that the teacher would dash off on the blackboard. Perhaps, of course, if his teacher had resembled Miss Shaw, he might have tried harder.

At the moment, however, neither UNIT's undeniably attractive female scientific adviser, nor her colleague, the Doctor, appeared to realize they had visitors. Their backs to the door, they both had their heads buried in the half-dismantled innards of a peculiar, freestanding hexagonal control unit that was topped by a glittering, complex mechanism encased in a glass cylinder, the function of which Mike could not even begin to guess at. Slightly muffled, there came the sounds of an incomprehensible scientific dialogue.

'Perhaps it's the time phase oscillator?'

'No, that's in balance now.'

'The photon accelerator coils?'

'Hardly likely.'

‘What about the tachyon beam collimator?’

‘Well, what about it?’

Elizabeth Shaw withdrew from the device and straightened up angrily, tossing back her mane of long blonde hair. ‘I’m only trying to help, Doctor!’

The Doctor quickly straightened in turn, his tone abruptly softening. ‘My dear Liz, please excuse me. I truly am most grateful for your assistance, but’ – he ran his fingers irritably through his shock of white hair and scratched the back of his head, a scowl of puzzlement on his craggy, distinguished features – ‘it’s just that it really *should* work properly now. I got so close during the Inferno project –’

‘Doctor, you nearly got stranded in that parallel dimension the console took you to, remember?’

‘Ah, yes, but I know what went wrong. At least, I *think* I do

–’

The Brigadier, piqued at being ignored for so long, cut in.

‘If you don’t mind, Doctor, Miss Shaw. Perhaps you can tear yourself away from tinkering with that machine for a moment.

We do have an *official* piece of work for you.’

The two scientists turned round in mild surprise at the interruption.

‘Oh, hallo there, Brigadier. What can we do for you?’ The Doctor beamed back at him amiably.

‘Sergeant Yates has just received this item from Australia.’

Mike put down the container on a bench and handed over the sheaf of technical notes to the Doctor, who flipped through them with remarkable speed. Liz, noting the radiation stickers, went to fetch a geiger counter, and ran it over the package.

‘As you can see,’ continued the Brigadier, ‘it was found in the Pacific somewhere northeast of New Zealand, inside a shark’s stomach, of all places. Apparently the creatures do eat odd things at times. This particular snack, however, seems to have been a little too much and it killed it. Fortunately its carcass was picked up by a scientific survey vessel, who recognized they had found something odd. Because of the

radioactivity, the military were alerted.' Liz carefully broke the seals on the container, then she donned a pair of heavy gloves and unlatched the lid. 'At first they thought it might be a fragment from an old atomic test or a lost nuclear submarine, but chemical analysis revealed it was some sort of synthetic alloy, combining the properties of both ceramics and metals. It doesn't match anything known.' Liz reached into the container with a pair of long-handled tongs, and carefully withdrew the artifact. Mike and the Brigadier automatically took a pace backwards.

'It's all right,' Liz reassured them. 'The radiation is low level. I'm only being careful just in case.' She deposited the object on a stand in a heavy lead glass isolation cabinet and closed the lid.

The mysterious artifact was a twisted, silvery white lozenge, about a foot long. The remains of machined edges could still be seen along one side. Cut into one of its flatter planes was a string of odd looking characters.

'Ah, yes. That's what I want you to look at especially,' the Brigadier explained. 'If those marks are writing, then it's in no language known on Earth.' He looked at the Doctor hopefully.

'You can't read it, I suppose?'

The Doctor smiled, tossed aside the notes, and peered intently at the artifact. 'My dear Lethbridge-Stewart, there are several million languages in this galaxy alone, a few of which even I've never come across. But, it does look vaguely familiar.' He rubbed his chin. 'If I can get the TARDIS

reference banks working properly, I might be able to translate it for you.'

'It is alien then?'

'Oh yes, judging from the material analysis alone, there's no doubt about that.'

Mike had been listening to this remarkable exchange with mounting interest and amazement. From the familiar way the Doctor talked, it was almost as though he himself was...He glanced again at the police box in the corner. Benton had told Mike about the Doctor and his TARDIS, but, despite his experiences over the last year, he had hardly believed him.

‘Well, do your best, Doctor,’ the Brigadier said. ‘I want to know where the item came from and when it got here, if possible. There’s no knowing how long it was in the ocean before the shark found it, or how far it carried it before it died.

Is there some wrecked alien craft or device somewhere we should know about? Does it pose any danger of contamination? Liaise with Yates about anything you find and he’ll keep me informed of your progress.’

But the scientists were not listening. They had already become immersed in their new investigation.

‘What do you make of these readings, Doctor?’ Liz Shaw asked, showing him the gauges of the detector built into the isolation cabinet.

‘Omicron radiation. Of course, I might have guessed! Set up the full analyser, Liz, while I fetch something from the TARDIS. I know what we can use to track it down. Should have thought about it before...Probably needs an overhaul, but it should still work...’ His words trailed away as he hurried over to the police box, opened its narrow door, and slipped inside. Meanwhile, Liz wheeled over a trolley of complex electrical equipment and began arranging it beside the cabinet.

The Brigadier motioned to Mike and they walked quietly out of the laboratory, as unremarked as when they had entered. In the corridor his lips twitched into a half smile.

‘And that is your first lesson, Yates. Terrible at taking orders, these scientific types, but engage their curiosity and there’s no stopping them. Let’s hope,’ he added dryly, ‘they find the problem more digestible than the shark did!’

Three

ancy had not intended to see any more of the island than Nthe view from the deck. She had rebutted de Veer’s plea to give Salutua a chance with a withering, ‘What are studio stages and back lots for, then?’ and had shut the cabin door in his face. She planned to sulk until Grover came down, all anxious and apologetic, when she would proceed to twist him skilfully round her little finger as usual, until he gave in to her demands.

It had seemed such a good idea, just a few weeks ago, to embark on a

working cruise across the Pacific, scouting an exotic, mysterious island for a possible film location. She had never been abroad before, and Grover had always talked about such places with infectious enthusiasm. But she had soon discovered how much she was a city girl at heart. Despite the spacious comforts of the *Constitution*, she had rapidly become bored with ship life and disturbed by the endless, open ocean.

When they reached Tahiti, she found the primitive conditions and the untamed hinterland of the island as unsettling, in its own way, as the sea. It was a jungle every bit as unforgiving as that of the brick and concrete one she had grown up in.

Except here she did not know its rules. As they had sailed on south, her depression and unease had grown, despite Grover's best efforts to cheer her. They had searched until they found Salutua. And now, just a few hours after the discovery, they were marooned on its shore.

This was not an incident she had planned for the career of Nancy Grover, nee Elza Mazowalski of Pittsburgh, transformed by studio artifice and deed poll into that rising star of the silver screen, Nancy Norton!

An hour passed. Grover did not come. The cabin grew hot and stuffy as the sunlight glared back off the beach at the exposed yacht. The ceiling fan did not seem to help, and, tilted in common with the rest of the ship, it gave an annoying squeak as it turned. Clanging began to reverberate through the vessel, from both inside and out, as the men got to work on the hull while the tide was low. There came the distant sound of several pairs of feet on the gangway, as though a party had just gone ashore, then silence descended, except for the pounding repair work. Nancy felt a headache coming on. She had Tilly, her maid, rub eau de Cologne into her temples, but it didn't help. Angrily, she realized she couldn't stay inside any longer. But she would make it obvious how unsuitable the whole situation was for her.

She changed into a light, flowing summer dress, with dainty, impractical shoes and a large sunhat. Picking up a parasol, she strode out on deck, radiating injured forbearance.

It was unexpectedly deserted. The palm trees drooped along the shore, and a few sea birds circled lazily in the hot sky above, as though inspecting the yacht suspiciously. In the tropics this was siesta time, and even with the yacht aground this habit seemed to have quickly re-established its slumberous routine on the ship's company – almost.

From somewhere she could hear the distant clatter of a typewriter in between the thumping on the metalwork. Except for Miss Ellis and the repair crew, she amended. Leaning over the rail, she saw Ferraro below supervising the rigging of a canvass awning over the damaged section of the hull to shield the workers from the high sun. A little way up the beach, Grover was talking earnestly to Captain Pascoe and McCloud, their engineer. She made for the accommodation ladder, now secured down the ship's side, a little surprised to find a sailor carrying a rifle on guard at its head. She realized there were two more armed sailors visible on the shore, standing in the shade of the palms. The lower end of the ladder was resting on a pontoon, with a length of duck-boarded walkway running up the beach above the straggling line of flotsam that marked the high tide mark. She descended and stepped off the boarding, her heels sinking awkwardly into the soft white sand. A trail of several pairs of footprints led up into the trees, suggesting that the others had already begun exploring.

Nancy made her way over to the men. Pascoe touched his hat politely.

'Glad to see you're feeling better, Mrs Grover. I hope the repairs didn't wake you.'

She realized Grover had explained her absence by implying that she had been unwell. Before she could frame a suitable response, her husband, smiling a little anxiously, said quickly:

'That's better, Nancy, get some fresh air. Maybe it'll be cooler in the trees. Say, why don't you go after the others and take a look around? Just a little way. You'll be quite safe with a guard. I'll follow on in once we've got things sorted here.

This is really an incredible place. Think what we can do with this as a backdrop for your picture.'

His whole manner was so full of concern and eagerness to please, that Nancy realized it was not the time to complain further. She acquiesced with a brave smile. 'I'll try, Marshal,'

she replied demurely.

'That's grand,' he exclaimed with relief.

Pascoe called over to the guards for an escort. Ferraro came across, a rifle under one arm. 'I'll be glad to go along with Mrs Grover myself, sir. Don't worry, I'll take good care of her.'

Together they set out, and in a minute had passed through the fringe of palms and into the forest proper. It was at least cooler, if slightly more humid, than the beach. Despite her own preoccupations, Nancy paused to take in the strange scene. Gradually she began to realize what Grover had meant.

From the beach it had seemed as though the ground rose steadily from the shore inland, judging by the tree tops lifting beyond the palms. Now she saw that it was the trees themselves that grew larger. There were split coconut shells the size of melons on the ground, and wild banana trees bowed down with monstrous bunches of the fruit. Soon they were walking amongst veritable giants, their tremendous girths dividing into ribbed buttress roots as they reached the ground. Everything was tinted in a green twilight, with only a few sunbeams penetrating to the surprisingly bare forest floor.

Where they did, however, great sprays of fern erupted, curling high over her head, interspersed with shrubs sprouting waxy, bottle green leaves as wide as her outstretched arms.

Feathering the lower trunks were shaggy vines and the slotted leaves of cheese plants, questing skyward for the light and climbing the mounds of earth about their bases, apparently heaved upward by the splayed fingers of the great roots. The faint path that the pair were on ran between the roots in the miniature valleys thus formed, and Nancy felt that they were walking in the cracks on the floor of some living cathedral, with the tree columns reaching up to the distant leafy canopy of the roof. But it was a constantly decaying structure. The remains of many fallen trees lay across the forest floor, or hung half way, caught by a tangle of rope-thick creepers.

Their trunks formed natural bridges and arches, and provided growing space for brilliantly blossomed orchids and other parasites.

It was a magnificent but unsettling scene. She could believe anything might live here. It made her feel vulnerable and insignificant, and she did not enjoy such sensations.

‘There’s something not right about this place,’ she exclaimed aloud. Disquiet temporarily caused the veneer of studio-taught elocution to slip, making her words slightly.harsher than she intended and recalling the thick accent of the mean streets she had been born in and had worked so hard to escape.

Ferraro seemed not to notice her lapse. ‘It sure is odd, Mrs Grover,’ he

agreed. They heard voices from between the towering trunks and picked their way towards them.

Sternberg had found a small open glade, and was busily taking samples of plants and earth and any insects, all the while muttering away half to himself in a mixture of English and German, and occasionally Latin scientific nomenclature.

Two sailors cradling rifles watched on, mystified by his excitement. Amelia, dressed in practical boots and breeches and a pith helmet, was helping him with collecting bottles, and taking a kindly interest in what he was doing. Even with one arm she was unfailingly helpful and uncomplaining, thought Nancy. Just for once she'd like to see her break down and admit what she felt about being crippled.

Amelia saw them and smiled brightly. 'Hallo, Nancy, Mr Ferraro.' Beside her, Ferraro was grinning back amiably, which caused Nancy an additional frisson of jealously. People liked Amelia automatically, whereas, beyond admiration for her looks, Nancy knew that she had to work hard to be appreciated for her own sake.

'Is Larry de Veer around?' Nancy asked coolly. 'I want to talk about the picture.'

'Over there, I think.' Amelia pointed through the trees, then gave Nancy a searching look. 'I'm glad you're reconsidering. I do hope you make the picture. It would make Pa happy and might be good for the studio.'

Amelia was sincere, Nancy knew, but she was probably privately doubtful of her motives. Despite her open, apparently guileless nature, Amelia was no fool. She had assessed Nancy's motivation accurately from quite early in their relationship. One day she had surprised Nancy by bluntly informing her, in private, that she knew she was a gold digger, but while she kept her father happy she would not interfere.

They had come to an unspoken understanding to be civil in public and not to disagree on personal matters in front of Grover. But they would never be friends.

'Thank you, Amelia,' Nancy said, with a thin smile. 'I hope so too.'

Then Sternberg came forward eagerly, thrusting a collecting jar at Nancy. 'See what wonders we have already found!' he exclaimed in delight. Nancy flinched. A huge, glossy-black beetle, six inches long,

was scrabbling futilely up the sides of the glass prison. ‘You realize the usual size of these creatures is no more than four centimetres – two inches at most. Is it not magnificent!’

A memory came back to Nancy of the cockroaches that had crawled across her bed when she was young. ‘Take that thing away!’ she gasped.

Ferraro stepped forward. ‘That’s enough, Prof. Can’t you see Mrs Grover doesn’t like bugs?’

Sternberg looked bemused. Amelia looked at Nancy narrowly, then said: ‘I’m sorry it frightened you. Come on, Professor. Let’s try over here.’

Queasily, Nancy stumbled away, with Ferraro frowning in concern at her side. ‘Are you okay, Mrs Grover? Perhaps we’d better get back now?’

‘No. I want to find Mr de Veer. I must make him see this is a foolish idea. I mean, I can do better than be in some crazy fantasy picture, can’t I?’

‘I think you can play any part you want, Mrs Grover.’ He looked uncharacteristically shy for a moment. ‘I’ve seen all your films,’ he admitted. ‘If I may say, I think you’re a fine actress.’

Pleased by this honest, unsolicited praise, Nancy gave Ferraro an appraising glance. He was quite a specimen of manhood, she decided: lean and strong, with a hint of darkly handsome latin blood. A pity he hadn’t got money or a position to go with his looks. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to flatter him a little and play the lady of delicate sensibilities.

‘Why, thank you, Mr Ferraro, you’re very kind,’ she said, in her most gracious manner. ‘I must admit, I wouldn’t go a step further in this place if you weren’t here with me.’

Ferraro swelled at the compliment.

They found the film makers in a larger clearing caused by the collapse of a truly monstrous tree, the remains of which were already colonized by smaller growths and feathered with fungi. More armed sailors were sitting smoking on top of the great trunk, their rifles resting casually over their knees.

Dodgeson had set up his silent 35 millimetre camera on a tripod and

was making test pans of scenery. Meanwhile, de Veer strode around taking in the surroundings and making notes for the screenplay.

As soon as he saw her, he said enthusiastically: 'Do you see what I meant now, Nancy? We couldn't build all this on a back lot. I wish we'd brought the whole crew with us now.

Still, when I've had a chance to scout the place properly, we'll try some test shots of you and Montgomery. Then, when I've worked up an outline –'

'Larry,' Nancy said firmly, stemming the flow. 'I want to talk to you about the picture – in private.'

De Veer frowned. 'Okay, if you want.'

They walked along beside the fallen tree until they were a little way from the others. 'Don't go too far, Mrs Grover,'

Ferraro called after them.

When they could not be overheard, Nancy came straight to the point. 'I'm not filming here.'

'Look, just because we've had a little bad luck to start with

–'

'It gives me the shivers! There's something wrong here, and I'm not going to stay an hour longer than I have to!'

De Veer laid a reassuring hand on her arm. 'Okay, so it's a strange place, but you knew that when we started. That's what we're after! There has to be a reason for it – some freak of nature – but Sternberg can sort that out. Meanwhile we can –'

'Meanwhile *nothing*!'

Taken aback by her determination, de Veer tried another tack. 'You know times are hard back home. If this picture is a success, it could help keep a lot of people in work. So why can't you put up with this place just for a couple of weeks?'

He could tell that this was making no impression on Nancy's hard eyes, so he added: 'And what about Grover? He rescued Paragon mostly for you, and he wants you to star in this picture because he truly believes it will help your career.

Don't you think you owe him something for that?'

'I married him, didn't I?'

De Veer frowned. 'I didn't know it was that sort of arrangement.'

'It isn't – at least, not on his side,' Nancy admitted candidly.

'My God, that's cynical! What does that make you?'

'A star,' Nancy blazed back at him. 'It's going to make me the biggest star in the movies! Everybody's going to know my name! And I'm not going to risk it all on some miserable bug-ridden island, making a stupid monster fantasy picture, if I don't want to!'

With an effort, de Veer said levelly: 'You have a contract, remember.'

'I'm married to the owner of the studio now, so I write my own contracts. And when I talk him around, I don't want any trouble from you, understand?'

De Veer suddenly chuckled mirthlessly. 'Time was when you were going to marry the studio's top director. Then you went after Grover and I was hurt, you know, but at least I thought it was a genuine romance. Now I guess I simply didn't have ambition enough for your tastes. You're lucky the camera loves you, Nancy, because I don't anymore.'

Nancy smiled coldly. 'I can live with that.'

De Veer seemed to make one last effort. 'All right, Nancy.

Forget everyone else but yourself. You're good at that. You might run down *Kong*, but I reckon it saved RKO from going under. Paragon's shaky as well, despite the money Grover's put into it. If you want to be a star, you've got to have a working studio behind you, and Paragon needs a box office hit to stay afloat and this could be it! But it only works if we have a new angle, and that's to film as much live and on location as possible. Montgomery's game enough, and I thought you understood. If we find what we hope to here, it'll give us the edge over *Kong* and anybody else out to jump on the same bandwagon. The audience can see it was for real, and not trick photography. Damn it, Nancy, this is for your own good!

Can't you put up with a little discomfort for that?'

Nancy wavered. There was some sense in what he said.

Perhaps it would be worth letting herself be talked round this time, but it would be best not to make it too easy –

There was a slithering rustle from above.

A snake's head as wide as a man's shoulders glided smoothly over the curve of the tree trunk, its forked tongue flickering before it, tasting the air. Two cold reptilian eyes gleamed down at them with terrible intent. Huge jaws gaped wide, revealing foot-long fangs.

Nancy screamed.

A shot rang out, then another. Through her terror, Nancy saw Ferraro and the other two sailors pelting towards them, firing their rifles as they ran. Behind them, Dodgeson automatically swung his camera round to record the incredible scene.

A bullet tore into the snake's blunt snout, opening a ragged wound. Another ripped open its throat. With a terrible rasping hiss, the spade-like head jerked away. De Veer and Nancy leapt aside as a coil of its scaly body slithered over the trunk, tearing free rotted bark and slabs of fungi, and thumped to the ground, writhing and twisting. Another coil followed, and then the whole animal was thrashing about in the clearing, confused and desperate to escape the bullets that stung and gouged its flesh. Fifty feet of sinuous body as thick as a man's trunk coiled and uncoiled like a severed hawser, flattening clumps of fern in its agony. Jaws agape, the snake lunged at its assailants, but the sailors maintained their fire and drove it back. Gradually its spasms weakened, and with a final twitch and shiver that ran down its whole body, the head dropped to the earth and the beast was still.

Gasping and trembling, her face deathly pale, Nancy scrambled away from the corpse on her hands and knees. Her fine dress was torn and smeared with earth and mould, she had lost a shoe, and her hat lay a few yards away, crumpled under a coil of the snake. She glared at de Veer in fear and rage, tears brimming in her eyes.

'I...I told you!' she stammered, her voice rising to a shrill.

'We'll die if we stay here!'

Through misty eyes she saw Sternberg, Amelia and their guards burst into the clearing. Sternberg looked down in wonder at the huge reptile, temporarily lost for words. Amelia stepped over to Nancy and

helped her up. Nancy forgot their animosity and clung to her for support, vaguely aware of Ferraro looking on in concern and de Veer thanking him for his vigilance.

A moment later, Grover and a party of sailors from the beach sprinted into the clearing at a dead run, only to stop short in amazement at the sight. Nancy pulled away from Amelia and almost fell into Grover's arms, still trembling with shock.

'Please...we've got to get away from here...as soon as the repairs are done...' she choked out brokenly. Underneath, in that detached, calculating part of her, she felt a strange sense of relief. After this he could not possibly refuse her.

But though Grover's face contorted in sympathy and anguish, all he said was: 'We'll see, Honey. We'll see.'

Dinner that night was an uncomfortable affair, Amelia conceded to herself.

Dodgeson had hastily developed the film of the snake fight in the yacht's comprehensive darkroom, and they had all, except Nancy, watched the reel several times. Now, as they ate, Sternberg, Dodgeson and de Veer, with almost schoolboyish enthusiasm, were inevitably speculating as to whether the island held other such monstrous beasts, while Montgomery made off-colour jokes about snakes. Miss Ellis ate quietly, as usual, and only made polite comments when directly addressed. Nancy was tight-lipped and radiated frustrated anger, gazing reproachfully at Grover. Amelia watched her father curiously, expecting some response to this silent onslaught – but none came. When the meal was over, Nancy excused herself and disappeared to her cabin.

Sternberg also departed, returning to the cabin next to his own, which had been fitted out as a laboratory, so that he could resume his work on the samples he had collected that day. The rest took drinks and cigars out on deck, where moths and mosquitoes fluttered suicidally about the *Constitution*'s lamps. The light of a tropical moon glittered across the waters of the lagoon and turned the beach into a pale and ghostly ribbon. But the shadows merged under the tall trees, and the dark mass of the island seemed to loom ominously over them.

Amelia joined her father as he leaned on the rail, and for a while they stood silently together. Then she asked: 'Pa, why didn't you tell Nancy we'd leave once the repairs are finished?

She really was frightened by that snake, you know, and who could blame her?' She looked out at the black silhouette of the island, a frown creasing her normally clear brow. 'And I've got a sense of...well, call it foreboding, about this place. What else might be hiding in there, and is it worth the risk simply to make a film? Can't we just go as soon as possible?'

Her father looked as though he was struggling with some deep internal conflict. Gently he put his hand over hers as it rested on the rail, his normally powerful, commanding tones strangely muted: 'Amy, the Lord knows I'd do anything for you or Nancy. But there are very good reasons why we may have to stay here a little longer. I can't tell you right now what they are, but you'll learn soon, I hope. Until then, will you just trust that your old dad knows what he's doing?'

Puzzled, Amelia nevertheless replied reassuringly: 'Of course I will, Pa.'

Grover smiled. 'And don't worry, we'll take good care of you. We did for that snake, after all, big as he was. And apart from rifles, there are a couple of cases of dynamite on board.

With that, we can stop anything –'

From out of the dark woods, a distant but piercing cry seemed to drop in pitch and into their range of hearing, making them all flinch in surprise. A second shrill voice joined it, and in moments an unearthly chorus of shrieks and sharp squeals could be heard. The yacht's company lined the rails on both decks and peered intently out into the night, but the source of the stridor was hidden from view somewhere deep in the forest. The men on guard licked their suddenly dry lips and held their rifles ready.

For half an hour the terrible screeches continued, rising and falling in clarity as their sources apparently moved across the island. Twice, the medley of cries rose into fierce and angry frenzy, suggesting pain and conflict, and causing the listeners to wince and stop their ears against the penetrating sound that set their teeth on edge. Then, gradually, the clamour subsided, as one by one the voices fell silent. Within minutes, only the normal muted noises of the tropical night could be heard, and it was as though nothing untoward had occurred. A puzzled calm reasserted itself on the yacht.

Captain Pascoe ordered the guard doubled, but nobody would honestly claim to have slept well that night.

Four

ike Yates entered the laboratory the next morning to Mfind the Doctor and Liz already hard at work on a haywire amalgam of complex equipment.

The alien artifact still rested in its insulated box, but the sensor couplings now ran directly to the hexagonal console unit. A new device stood beside it, coupled by a trailing spray of wires. It held a keyboard, with an open panel above it revealing exposed circuitry, suggesting that a mounting had been removed. From this in turn ran a conduit to another new piece of apparatus, set a little in front of the linked units. It was a hoop formed of many coils of wire, about seven feet across (reminding Mike somewhat of the coils of an armature), held upright by a bolted framework of light metal stanchions. Heavy-duty power cables ran from all three devices to a bank of high-capacity electrical accumulators mounted on a rack of free-standing metal shelves. The Doctor was sitting cross-legged on the floor, absentmindedly singing a sort of chant softly to himself as he made the connections between the hoop and the conduit. Neither the words nor the tune sounded remotely like anything Mike had ever heard before. Liz Shaw was working on the console itself, and she raised an inquiring eyebrow at him.

'Come to check up on us, Sergeant Yates? You can assure the Brigadier we are working assiduously on his little problem...' She yawned. 'Excuse me...I was here till ten o'clock yesterday evening helping set up the equipment, and the Doctor's worked all night. How's that for dedication?'

Mike frowned at the Doctor, who was working on apparently oblivious to his presence. 'Doesn't he have a home to go to?'

Liz nodded at the police box, still sitting incongruously in the corner of the laboratory. 'That's his home.'

Mike tried to look nonchalant. 'Oh yes, that's the TARDIS, isn't it? I've heard...something about it.'

Liz smiled knowingly. 'Go on. I can see you're dying to take a look inside. Well the Doctor won't mind, and I'm sure the Brigadier wouldn't let you in here if you hadn't signed all the right security forms.'

Mike walked over to the police box and peered cautiously in at its half open door.

‘It’s quite safe. Just don’t touch anything – or get lost!’

Mike grinned at her warning, then realized she was not joking. Hesitantly he stepped inside.

He was gone for nearly ten minutes. When he finally emerged, he was still shaking his head.

‘I couldn’t quite believe what I’d heard before. That box actually is bigger inside than out!’

‘The Doctor’s catch phrase is “dimensionally transcendental”. Why don’t you practise it?’ Liz suggested dryly. ‘It’ll impress the Brigadier.’

‘It seems to extend for miles. How does it all fit in?’

Liz raised a challenging eyebrow. ‘Do you want the *complete* explanation?’

‘Ah…no, probably not. But why are there so many loose wires hanging about in there?’

‘It needs some repairs to get it working properly again.

That’s why the main console is out here.’ She leant forward confidentially. ‘Actually, I think it’s been in need of a good overhaul for years, but the Doctor’s been too busy flitting about the universe to get around to it.’

Mike looked with new respect at the velvet jacketed figure hunched over his work. He half whispered: ‘So he really is a –

’

‘An alien time traveller, Sergeant Yates,’ the Doctor cut in, turning round briefly to favour him with a cheerful smile, before returning to his wiring. ‘You’d better accept the fact if we’re to work together, you know.’

Mike could think of no suitable response, and only a string of probably foolish questions, so he retreated to the matter in hand. The rest would no doubt take care of itself, eventually.

‘Can I tell the Brigadier that you’re making progress towards finding out where that thing came from, Doctor?’

‘My dear chap, do have a little patience. We only learnt of the

artifact's existence less than a day ago. Why not come back this afternoon. We might have something to show you then.'

'Right, ah...what actually is it you're trying to do, by the way?'

Liz explained. 'According to the Doctor, the artifact is emitting a particular type of energy called omicron radiation.

With the TARDIS console and this' – she tapped the partially dismembered unit beside it – 'which was once a sort of space-time television of the Doctor's –'

'Visualizer,' the Doctor muttered.

'Space-time *visualizer*,' Liz amended, 'we hope to be able to follow the trace of that radiation through the continuum back to its origin, and display the location as an actual image over there.' She pointed to the coil the Doctor was working on.

'I see,' said Mike, trying to sound informed. 'Right, well, I'll be back this afternoon.' He glanced once again at the TARDIS as he walked thoughtfully out.

The lab was no less cluttered that afternoon, but the equipment had a slightly more finished look about it, and some of the untidy webwork of couplings and cables had been taped together into more manageable bundles. The Doctor was calibrating the visualizer keyboard while Liz was making notes and labelling certain switches.

The Doctor beamed at Mike, looking remarkably spry and alert despite his having worked through the night.

'Just in time, Sergeant Yates. I think we're about ready for a demonstration. All set, Liz?'

'I still wish we had a greater energy reserve, but I suppose we've got enough for a trial run. Okay, ready when you are, Doctor.'

The Doctor started to operate the controls, switching rapidly between the TARDIS console and the visualizer keyboard. Indicator lights began to glow and flicker, and Liz noted the readings on her clipboard. There was a low hum of slowly building power, and Mike felt the tingle of electricity in the air.

'Now watch the imaging coil, Sergeant,' said the Doctor, adjusting a large dial carefully.

For a moment, all Mike could see through the coil was the far side of the laboratory. Then a mistiness seemed to swirl about within it and the background blurred and rippled, as though he was looking through running water. Suddenly the disc blanked into opacity, and he saw a jumble of confused images. He got the fleeting impression of faces, oddly distorted, peering out of the immaterial screen. There were several different views of the Doctor and Liz, then a moustached face that could only be the Brigadier. For an instant he thought he saw his own features staring out at him, then there was blackness.

'We're viewing the journey of the artifact back through time,' the Doctor explained, 'using the omicron radiation track as a guide. It's as though we're witnessing events from the artifact's viewpoint as the image locus follows it.'

Light and movement again burst on to the screen, with flashes of faces Mike did not recognize looming up and pulling away quickly, interspersed with regular flickers of darkness. A phrase popped into Mike's mind: 'night followed day like the flapping of a black wing'. From Wells's *The Time Machine*, of course. It suddenly struck him forcefully that he was actually watching that very succession in reverse, running backwards into the past. The images on the screen became a blur, then resolved to a blue-black obscurity that remained almost constant, except for the faint flicker of the day–night cycle.

'The longer intervals are presumably when it was sealed in its container, inside the shark's stomach, or lying at the bottom of the sea in near constant darkness,' commented the Doctor. 'We're going back faster now. What's the reading, Liz?'

'Minus 35 years...37 –'

There was a blaze of light.

'Ah,' exclaimed the Doctor, 'I think this is it!'

'Losing the focus,' said Liz.

The Doctor's hands flew over the controls, and the last image shivered and stabilized on the screen. Mike saw a stretch of grey-black rocks frozen in mud-like ripples and crossed by cracks, all half obscured by a haze of steam and smoke that limited visibility to five or six yards. It reminded him of pictures he had seen of geyser land, or solidified lava flows.

'Within a few feet and a few days of that location in space and time,

the artifact came into being in its present form,' the Doctor declared.

Mike cautiously moved closer to the image coil. He found to his surprise that the scene altered as he changed position, his angle of view widening the closer he got, as though he were looking through a slightly misty window and not at a projected, fixed image. But there was little else to see apart from more rocks and steam. Peering upwards he caught a glimpse of blue sky through a rift in the haze.

'All right, Doctor. I admit it's very impressive. But where is it...and when, exactly?'

Liz consulted the readings, noting down numbers on her board. 'The place is the South Pacific – probably an island on the edge of French Polynesia, I'd say, from the latitude and longitude. The time is the eighth of June, nineteen thirty-four.'

'Well, that's something to be going on with,' said Mike.

'At least we can let our Canberra office know where to start looking for any more remains. Thanks, Doctor, Miss Shaw.'

'Don't be too hasty, Sergeant,' the Doctor cautioned. 'I think we can do better than this. Liz, raise the coil power input to thirty percent, please.'

Mike saw her move a sliding lever up a couple of notches and immediately the image within the coil sharpened further.

The Doctor turned to the visualizer control panel and carefully moved a small joystick. The image seemed to swell, and the rocks rushed at Mike, causing him to flinch back. For a moment it had felt as though he had been moving.

'You might have warned me,' he complained.

'Now that we have a fix on specific coordinates, we can move the viewing locus about freely,' the Doctor explained proudly, making the image track and pan and then rotate on its own axis. Suddenly, however, it darted off to one side, weaving drunkenly about, and the Doctor hastily re-set the controls to bring it back to its starting position. He gave a slightly embarrassed cough.

'Of course, the calibration may be a little off. Should be more stable on higher power.'

Smiling, Liz made a note on her clipboard.

But now the Doctor's eyes gleamed. 'Liz, up another sixty percent.'

'We can only sustain that level for a few minutes, you know.'

'I know, but let's try it anyway.'

Liz slid the lever further along its slot. The power hum rose slightly. Mike saw the scene through the coil harden into an illusion of perfect reality. Suddenly he could hear the steady hiss of venting steam, accompanied by a change in acoustics that suggested a large open space beyond the murk. So realistic was the image now that he almost imagined the whiff of sulphur.

'I didn't realize you could get sound as well,' he exclaimed, beginning to be seriously impressed by the demonstration.

The Doctor scanned the displays and smiled to himself. Liz looked at him curiously.

'All right, Liz, power back to ten percent.'

The power hum faded, the sound died, and the image within the coil coarsened, its colour bleaching away until it seemed distant and rather unreal. Mike thoughtfully watched it recede, the military possibilities of the system beginning to dawn on him. If only it could be made to work in contemporary time, think what a reconnaissance device it would make!

'The Brigadier will want to have a look at this,' he declared, and strode purposefully out.

An awkward silence fell in the lab.

Liz looked suspiciously at the Doctor. She could tell he was up to something. He responded by raising his eyebrows in mild enquiry, implying innocent puzzlement. Without a word, she walked over to the imaging coil and sniffed the air. Then she bent down and wiped her fingers over the floor in front of it. They left a trail in a small patch of condensation.

'What's going on, Doctor?' she demanded.

'My dear Liz –' he began placatingly, but Liz cut him short.

'Now don't you "My dear Liz" me! This is more than an audiovisual

scanner. It's a physical link, isn't it? Well?'

The Doctor looked contrite. 'There was a possibility that, at high power, with the omicron trace to give stability, the system might act as a space–time bridge. But I wasn't sure –'

'You mean you can just step through it into the past?'

'Certainly, with the time rates now in phase on both sides –

,

'So *that's* why you were working on it so eagerly. Oh, Doctor! Remember what happened the last time you tried to improvise something like this with the console? You nearly got killed!'

'But don't you see, Liz, this is my chance to bypass the restrictions the Time Lords placed on me. Take the first step, at least. You've no idea how it feels to be confined to just one planet and time...' He paused. 'Well, I suppose you do. But imagine what it would be like to be restricted to one country, one city, with the whole world denied to you.' He gave her a hopeful, slightly anxious smile, making it hard to stay angry with him. 'Now you can't blame me for trying to escape in those circumstances, can you?'

She had to smile back in return. 'No, I suppose not. But I just wish you'd told me what you were trying to do first. And what about the Brigadier? Yates is probably telling him right now how hard we're working on the problem of the artifact, when really it's still your time travel experiments.'

'Not at all,' the Doctor insisted stoutly. 'Two birds with one stone, and all that. Now I can actually investigate the origin of his precious artifact on the spot, as it were. How can he possibly object?'

'I can imagine a few ways,' Liz responded dryly. 'He'll say it's too dangerous for a start, and I'd agree with him. That looks like a volacanic crater to me, and it's clearly not yet extinct.'

'But neither has it been recently active, to any significant extent. The rocks have had time to cool and crack, as you can see,' the Doctor countered.

'Well, what if the bridge itself breaks down? You'll be marooned there.'

‘Which is why I want you at this end, just in case. Believe me, Liz,’ he said sincerely, ‘I have the greatest confidence in your abilities, should anything go wrong.’ He rubbed his chin.

‘But you may be right about Lethbridge-Stewart. Perhaps I’d better present him with a *fait accompli*.’

He strode over to the TARDIS and disappeared inside, leaving a worried Liz behind him. He was back out in a minute carrying a small backpack, and with a respirator mask and goggles hanging loosely about his neck.

‘There,’ he said reassuringly, patting the pack. ‘Radiation detector, torch, survival rations, even a first aid box. You can’t say I haven’t gone properly prepared now, can you?’

She sighed resignedly. ‘All right, Doctor, I can see you’re determined. But please be careful!’

‘Naturally.’ He looked surprised. ‘When have I ever taken risks?’

‘Never mind. What do you want me to do?’

‘Power up to maximum while I cross over, then down to ten to keep visual contact. There should be enough charge in the accumulators at that level of expenditure to hold the bridge open for several hours at least. Step up the power a little if you want to move the locus, but don’t do it unless you have to. I’ll signal when I want to return.’

‘Understood. Go on, before I change my mind.’

The Doctor stood before the image coil, drawing on his mask. Liz took a deep breath and pushed up the power lever.

With a rising hum the image sharpened into hard reality and the hiss of the steam vents could be heard. The Doctor stepped over the lower curve of the coil and on to the dark, rippled rock beyond. He looked around for a moment, then gave a thumbs-up sign to Liz. She reduced the power again and the sound faded away. She saw the Doctor, now just an image within the coil and as insubstantial as a character on television, take out his radiation detector and start sweeping it to and fro.

At that moment, Mike Yates and the Brigadier entered.

‘Right, Doctor,’ said the Brigadier briskly, ‘let’s see this new gadget of

yours. Now where's he got to?'

Liz pointed mutely at the coil.

The Brigadier saw the Doctor's image, took an incredulous step forward and came close to clutching his head. 'Oh, good grief! What's he up to now? Doctor! Doctor! I told you not to try any more of these experiments. Come back here at once, man!' He gestured urgently.

'He can't hear you, Brigadier,' Liz said quickly.

By chance the Doctor turned, saw the audience had increased by two, and waved back cheerfully. Then he walked away into the haze, head bent over the radiation detector.

'Perhaps not, but he knows what I mean!' the Brigadier exclaimed in annoyance, rounding on Liz. 'This is most irresponsible of both of you, Miss Shaw. Can't you bring him back here?'

'Not forceably, Brigadier – unless you'd like to go through after him? But I'd rather not use the extra power, or we may not get him back at all.'

The Brigadier fumed impatiently, realizing there was nothing he could do. They were all silent for a minute, waiting for the Doctor's reappearance.

Then Mike sniffed and frowned. 'Can you smell burning?'

'It's the sulphur from the volcano,' said Liz automatically.

Then she smelt it herself, and looked about anxiously at the tangle of cables and equipment. Nothing seemed to be wrong.

Then she heard a pop and splutter from the accumulator racks.

She spun round in time to see acrid smoke rising from one of the cells on the second row, and snatched at a pair of insulated gloves and protective goggles. 'I must disconnect it!' she shouted.

There was a sharp bang and flash that temporarily dazzled them. The top of the heavy accumulator cell blew off, scattering corrosive electrolyte fluid, tearing free cables from its terminals, and flinging them across the contacts of the adjacent cells. There were more sparks and a flicker of fire as insulation ignited.

'We'll handle this,' the Brigadier barked at Liz, as he and Mike

grabbed extinguishers from their wall clips. ‘You get the Doctor back while there’s still a chance!’

Dry powder and carbon dioxide foam hissed and billowed behind Liz as she turned to the controls. The power levels were dropping as the accumulator connections burnt out.

Desperately, she diverted all the remaining reserves to the coil and the image hardened. She ran over to it and shouted:

‘Doctor! Come back! The bridge is failing!’

Heat sensors triggered the lab’s fire alarm, adding to the din.

A second accumulator burst. Liz felt a hot piece of wire stab into the back of her knee, just above her boot-top. She gasped and jerked away, stumbled over the coil frame, and fell through the space–time interface with only the slightest of tingling sensations.

She landed heavily on her hands and knees, grazing herself on the rippled black rock as she rolled on to her hip. Steam swirled about her and the heavy sulphurous air stung her throat.

Liz looked back just in time to see the floating disc of the interface and the laboratory beyond flicker and vanish before her eyes.

Five

omething had picked the huge carcass of the snake clean Sdown to the bone overnight, leaving hardly a shred of skin or flesh behind.

With the clearing still filled with morning shadows, Sternberg and de Veer both stared at the improbable skeleton stretched out beside the fallen tree, while Dodgeson snapped away with his Leica about the remains. Montgomery simply shook his head in amazement. The escort of sailors held their rifles a little closer and peered suspiciously at the gloom under the great trees.

‘Could it have anything to do with that racket we heard last night?’ de Veer speculated at length.

Sternberg responded irritably. ‘Ach, I do not know. I see no marks on the bones, and the ground is not good for tracks.

Thank goodness I obtained samples from the beast yesterday.’

He looked resolute. ‘So, I will continue with the exploration.’

‘Maybe both our groups should stick together for a while,’

de Veer suggested. ‘After all, we’re both looking for much the same things,’ he added lightly. And, he thought to himself, whatever had removed almost a ton of snake meat last night might still be hanging around.

Sternberg paused, looked at the remains again, dabbed at his forehead with his handkerchief, then nodded. ‘Perhaps it would be wise,’ he conceded.

The expedition pressed on into the forest.

The music faded away on to the sea breeze, and the hammering of the working party could be heard once more.

As Grover hesitantly crossed the deck there came the hiss and click of a needle running off into the centre grooves of the record. Nancy did not stir, though she must have heard him approach.

Dressed in a trim one piece swimsuit, she was reclining in a lounger under the shade of a large tasselled beach umbrella, pointedly set out on the *Constitution*’s sun deck, not the beach with the others. A tray of iced drinks was by her side, together with a wind-up gramophone, a pile of records, and a stack of movie magazines. As he looked down on her, Grover thought again how perfect and radiant she was. If only she didn’t have these little spats and rub people up the wrong way so often.

‘Nancy...can I talk to you?’

‘No,’ she said pre-emptively, ‘I’m not going to film here.

Ever! Back in the studio, fine, but not here. Not after the bugs.

And that snake! I mean, do you want me to risk my life to make this film?’

‘Of course not, Honey. That’s ridiculous. But the guards are ready for anything now. We’ll take no chances, believe me. Wherever you go will be scouted out thoroughly first.’

‘No,’ she responded flatly. Then suddenly she turned towards him, peering plaintively over the top of her sunglasses and suddenly sounding so anxious and vulnerable that it made Grover want to hug her to him. ‘Anyway, even if I tried, I’d be too nervous to give a good

performance, and I don't want to do that. Please, Marshal. Can we just leave when the repairs are done?'

It hurt to go against her, but he had no choice.

'How about this?' he suggested. 'When we get the ship fixed, we anchor her out in the lagoon. It'll be calm there and quite safe, and you don't have to come ashore if you don't want to –'

'I want to go home! They can come back and film another time.'

'That might not be so easy, Nancy. This island is in French territory, remember. Each trip out here would make it more likely they'll catch on. And once they know about Salutua and all the odd things here, they'd probably put a lid on it and we might not get a second chance for years.'

'Well let them.'

'But we've *got* to stay here!' The sudden passion in his voice caused Nancy to stare at him in surprise. He quickly moderated his tone. 'What I mean is it's unfair to all those good people, your colleagues, to deny them the opportunity to make something of this discovery. And I did promise Sternberg he would have plenty of time to make his scientific tests as a reward for putting me on to Salutua in the first place.

You wouldn't have me go back on my word, would you, Nancy?' For a moment he saw her waver and he added quickly: 'Look, suppose we stay for a week after we're fixed.

Just seven days. Then I promise we'll leave whether Sternberg and de Veer are finished their work here or not, and we'll take a chance on coming back again later. How's that?'

Nancy considered for what seemed like a very long time, but eventually nodded. 'Okay, but not an hour more.'

Grover felt immeasurably relieved, and beamed down at his wife. 'Sure, I understand. I'll go and tell de Veer myself right away so he can get on with his scouting. Still, he'll be sorry you're not going to be in the picture.'

Nancy sat up again with a surprised jerk. 'No, I *am* going to star in this picture, Marshal; I'm just not filming it *here*, that's all.'

De Veer surveyed the huge structure curiously, keeping back in the shadows at the edge of the trees. The tower of hard-packed red earth and mud rose two hundred feet above the floor of the clearing, its top catching the sunlight. At its base it must have measured fifty feet across. Its sides were fluted and pleated, as though incorporating integral buttresses. Running up within the ribbed folds they could see occasional dark openings of a foot or so across – rather like the portholes of some upended ocean liner, he thought. Occasionally there was an indistinct flicker of movement about their mouths.

Dodgeson was setting up his camera tripod to film the edifice while Montgomery observed with interest. The actor had donned a bush jacket and hat, and carried a rifle slung casually under his arm, looking the very image of an intrepid white hunter. Montgomery had the miraculous ability to turn up on time for his call, and apparently sober no matter what excesses he had indulged the night before, for which de Veer was sincerely grateful.

Sternberg was kneeling down with his ear pressed to the ground.

De Veer frowned at him. ‘What is that thing, Professor?

And what the heck are you listening for?’

Sternberg gestured impatiently for him to be quiet.

Puzzled, de Veer put his own ear to the ground.

The earth was buzzing faintly – for want of a better description. A complex, ever changing susurration that was a combination of many sounds overlaying each other: the patter of many feet, scratching, gnawing, rasping. De Veer looked questioningly at a delighted Sternberg, who climbed to his feet, dusting himself off.

‘Ants,’ he declared. ‘And that is their dwelling. The openings in its sides are to provide ventilation and to control the internal temperature of the structure. The relative proportions are not those of a regular nest, but then they are no doubt limited by the strength of the materials to hand.’

De Veer looked at the massive pile again, in disbelief. ‘Are you serious, Professor?’

Sternberg bristled. ‘Most certainly. I do not make a joke.

This is simply in keeping with the other examples of gigantism we

have already come across. Indeed, I should have guessed when we saw the snake had been dismembered so cleanly. No doubt these creatures were at least partially responsible.' He rubbed his hands together in delight and started forward towards the nest tower.

'Hold on, Professor,' de Veer cautioned. 'I want to see these things as much as you do, remember, but let's take a look at what we're dealing with first.' He turned to their escort. 'You men, get ready just in case.' The sailors raised their rifles. 'Camera?'

'Ready to roll, Mr de Veer,' Dodgeson confirmed, bending over the viewfinder.

De Veer picked up a stone, hefted it a few times to judge its weight, then tossed it across the clearing to bounce into one of the lower openings. At once there was a scrabble of movement from within and a faint chittering sound. A glossy red-brown form emerged from the hole in a flurry of legs. Its antennae twitched as its head turned from side to side.

Sunlight glittered off multifaceted compound eyes. Heavily barbed mandibles clicked together, as though it were flexing its muscles.

It was indeed an ant, and all of three feet long.

De Veer saw Dodgeson tense, but he never stopped working the camera.

Montgomery managed a slightly forced chuckle. 'Remind me not to invite them if I throw a picnic.' He lifted his rifle to his shoulder and sighted along the barrel. 'Want me to pot him, de Veer? Make a great shot. And what a trophy that head would be!'

De Veer looked at Sternberg, who nodded. 'Why not?

What is one ant to a nest? As long as I may examine the specimen first.'

'Won't it bring the rest out? There could be hundreds...

thousands more in there.'

'I think it not likely, as long as we do not threaten the nest itself.'

'Okay, Mike. But make it a clean shot.'

The rifle cracked once.

The bullet's impact snapped the bulbous head backwards as a neat hole appeared in the chitin between the ant's eyes.

The insect convulsed, antennae twitching frantically, then it sagged to the ground, its legs splaying out in the dust.

Montgomery laughed, pleased with his marksmanship.

'You're my witness, de Veer. When I tell people I can plug an ant between the eyes at 25 yards, you can swear it's the honest truth!'

Sternberg ran forward accompanied by a couple of guards, grabbed one of the ant's legs, and dragged it back into the trees. A second ant, as gigantic as the first, appeared at the nest entrance, but made no hostile move, content apparently to observe them with its huge, expressionless eyes, its antennae twitching occasionally. Nevertheless, the sailors kept a watchful eye on it and the other nest holes. As Sternberg was examining his new specimen, noting changes in its relative proportions in keeping with its increased size, Grover and Amelia appeared out of the forest with their escort.

'We heard a shot,' Grover said. 'Any trouble?'

'Montgomery just shot an ant,' de Veer replied with a grin, and went on enthusiastically to introduce their latest find, outlining how he could work the giants into the storyline. 'We can certainly make an incredible picture here, Mr Grover,' he concluded.

Grover frowned. 'I'm sure you're right, de Veer.

Unfortunately, you will have to make it without Nancy – at least while we're on Salutua. She realizes the potential of the film, now she's had a chance to think about it, and insists on being in it, but she's quite adamant she will only work in a studio.'

De Veer was crestfallen. Was Nancy doing this to spite him, or was she simply genuinely scared of the island? He could perhaps have forgiven the latter if she had not used up her store of goodwill a long time ago. All she had left was the gift of communicating through the camera and right into the heart of the audience. It more than compensated for her moderate acting ability. But without that, what else was there?

A pretty, rather selfish and self-centred woman. And he had once thought he loved her...

He tried not to show the depths of his annoyance and dismay before

Nancy's husband and owner of the studio, but exasperation still lent an edge to his words.

'Once the radio was fixed,' he explained, 'I was going to have a full crew sent out here with all the sound recording gear as soon as possible, on the strength of what we've already found. Meanwhile, we could get some silent background footage and long shots. But now I can't do any scene with Nancy in until I get a stand-in for her.'

Amelia said generously: 'I think it was the snake that did it.

She was terribly frightened.'

'But she knows we wouldn't risk that happening again!

We've doubled the guards and they know what to expect now.

She'd be as safe here as on the yacht. I mean, you seem to be managing okay, Miss Grover.'

Grover smiled proudly. 'Amy's a tough girl. She's been around the islands since she was small. Nancy's just not used to life in the wilds, I guess.'

'I'm sure that's it, Mr Grover,' de Veer forced himself to reply charitably. Visions of Nancy complaining about the inadequacies of her stand-in and demanding costly re-takes of location footage were already flashing before his eyes. She'd done it before in *The Carolina Belle*, he recalled unhappily.

'But this is going to mean more studio time and expense, I'm afraid.'

'I'd offer to stand in for Nancy myself if it would help,'

Amelia said lightly. 'But for obvious reasons I don't think it would work, even with Anni on.' She grinned and shrugged, emphasizing her missing arm.

'Anni?' De Veer was mystified.

'Artificial Anni, I call her. It's a false arm Pa had made for me. Fully adjustable and very realistic. The best you can buy.'

She smiled at her father. 'But I hardly ever wear it, which he can never understand. Sometimes I'm such a trial to him.'

'Never, Amy,' Grover said tenderly.

De Veer looked on in admiration. By golly, the girl was tough, just like Grover said. She never let it get her down. If only Nancy had a tenth of her spirit...Hold on! His mind raced. An idea, tenuous at first, began to take shape. It was a little strange, but it might just work. Yes, maybe he could make something of this setback after all. It would at least give Nancy a shock. And if it blew up in his face, well, he'd rather it was a clean break. He had a feeling that, one way or another, he would not be working with Nancy Norton for very much longer anyhow.

'Perhaps, Miss Grover,' he began tentatively, 'you can help after all.'

Six

ven as Liz was coughing and struggling to her feet, the Doct

E or appeared out of the steam and smoke like a well-dressed ghost. Three quick strides took him to her side.

'Liz, what happened? Are you all right?' His words were muffled by his breathing mask, but she could hear the concern in his tone.

'There was a short in the accumulators...' she tried to explain, in between coughs. 'Fire...Time bridge gone...' She doubled over, choking, eyes streaming. The Doctor pulled off his mask and put it over her nose and mouth. Then he lifted her upright, and led her off, half supporting her, through the swirling greyness. For several yards there were only the cracked and rippled black rocks underfoot. Then the mist began to thin and she saw dimly, through her watering eyes, a rock ledge before them, like a giant step. The Doctor helped her up it and after another few yards they came to a second one, which they also climbed. The light was growing brighter and Liz felt a blessed downdraught of cooler air in her face.

Once up the third ledge and on to a broad shelf of rock, the Doctor sat her down on a convenient boulder. He gently removed the respirator mask and offered her a handkerchief to mop her eyes.

'Thank you,' she said, coughing.

When at last she could see clearly, she found herself looking out across the interior of a volcanic caldera perhaps four hundred yards across. The far side was obscured by the steadily rising plume of steam from the vents in the crater floor, but the stepped sides of the crater were kept relatively clear by the constant upwelling of heated air and the cooler downdraught that replenished it. Around the haze of

venting steam, blue sky edged the rim of the crater, which was still a hundred feet above them. She noticed traces of vegetation on the higher slopes. About her feet were patches of red and yellow lichen, and even a few straggling weeds peeking out of the cracks in the rocks, suggesting that conditions in the crater had been stable for some time. At least there seemed to be no danger of any imminent eruption; that was something, she consoled herself, otherwise it really would have been a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire!

'Now, Liz, explain.' The Doctor was looking at her intently.

She took a deep breath and related concisely the sequence of events that had led to the breakdown and her unplanned arrival. The Doctor listened to her story, then rubbed the back of his neck, frowning.

'Well, it could have been worse, I suppose. As long as it was only the accumulators that were damaged, even the Brigadier's people should be able to replace them easily enough. And once the power is restored, the bridge will simply reappear again where it was before. As long as we keep checking the spot, we'll soon be picked up again.'

Liz had a feeling it wouldn't be quite so straightforward.

Somehow it never was. But she tried to sound relaxed about the situation. 'The Brigadier's not going to be pleased with you at all, Doctor – I hope you realize that.'

The Doctor grinned. 'Let's hope we have the opportunity to find out!'

She smiled back. 'All right, but the repairs are going to take a few hours at least. What shall we do till then? Look for the source of the artifact, I suppose?'

'No need for that, Liz. I've already found it.' He pointed behind her.

Liz twisted round.

Nestling against the crater wall was a dull black egg-shaped spacecraft.

'Right, Corporal,' the Brigadier demanded briskly. 'How long will it take you to get this lot patched up and working again?'

Corporal Thomas Osgood looked around the smoke-blackened laboratory in dismay.

‘Uh, if I could just check a few things first, sir.’

He took out a notepad and began an inspection of the remains, brushing away drifts of foam and extinguisher powder and jotting down a list of the damage, while Benton supervised a squad sweeping up the worst of the mess. Half the bank of accumulators had been badly scorched or had actually ruptured, and might need replacement, as did some of the wiring that linked them to the strange collection of equipment that filled the middle of the room. He kept well clear of that and prayed it wouldn’t need any repairs. Frankly it scared him. If you wanted a radio unit fixed or radar set serviced, he was quite happy to oblige. A computer mainframe playing up? No problem. But he knew his limits.

He’d seen the sort of devices that the Doctor and Liz Shaw played about with in their laboratory before, and he knew they took up where the theory he’d learnt in college left off. But of course pleading ignorance would cut no ice with the Brigadier. If he wanted something fixed, it got fixed, or else!

Osgood completed the examination and made his report.

‘Well, sir. The rewiring shouldn’t take more than a couple of hours, but the accumulators are going to be a problem. We need eight replacements. Unfortunately, they’re special high-capacity types, and the only firm that makes them is in Glasgow. I’ll have to get on to them to see if they’ve enough in stock, then get them sent down –’

The Brigadier was beginning to glower.

‘Can’t see it being ready before tomorrow afternoon, sir,’

Osgood concluded quickly.

The Brigadier scowled. ‘Very well, Osgood. You’d better order them then. And tell them it’s a priority!’

‘Yes, sir!’ Osgood left the lab smartly. As he passed through the doors, the Brigadier was holding Liz Shaw’s clipboard and showing it to Mike Yates.

‘Send these coordinates to Canberra, as it’s their neck of the woods. We’d better find out more about this place the Doctor’s so ingeniously marooned himself and Miss Shaw on.’

The spacecraft was about seventy feet long and thirty wide at its

maximum, Liz estimated. Slight grooves and indentations in its surface suggested the presence of access panels, exhaust vents and viewports, but otherwise it was quite featureless.

She also suspected it had been in the crater for some time.

'Look at the debris that's collected on it,' she commented, as the Doctor painstakingly traced the faint outline of a large hatch in the craft's side. 'It looks as though some of the rock has splashed over it when it was molten and solidified in place. It must have been here when the volcano was much more active than it is now. Who'd want to land in an active volcano?'

'Somebody who wanted to keep their feet warm?'

suggested the Doctor absently. He found a particular spot on the edge of the hatch and stood back a few paces, drawing out his sonic screwdriver. Liz covered her ears as the device warbled and buzzed shrilly. The hatch remained stubbornly closed, however. He frowned, and adjusted the screwdriver's settings. This time the pitch was higher, but there was still no reaction. Cautiously, the Doctor touched the spot on the hull that he had been aiming at, as though expecting it to be hot, then looked disappointed. 'Hmm. It must absorb energy like a sponge. Oh well, it was worth a try.'

Liz held out the detector again and checked the omicron radiation reading. 'There's no doubt the artifact was once part of this craft. At least we've solved the Brigadier's puzzle.'

'Yes,' agreed the Doctor wryly, 'but only by giving him an even bigger one. What happened to destroy the craft between now and our own time? Has it been abandoned here, or are the crew still inside?'

Liz started. She hadn't thought of that. 'But surely, if they were they'd have seen us by now and come out?'

'Always assuming they're still alive,' the Doctor replied sombrely. 'I rather suspect this was a forced landing. Look closely at the rear section. If you catch the angle of the light correctly, you can see irregular patches as though panels have been replaced and filled around.'

Liz examined the hull. 'I think you're right. But if the repairs were completed, why didn't they take off again?'

'I don't know. Perhaps there was more serious internal damage they

couldn't fix. And if the local environment was unsuitable for them, they might have simply had to wait for their life-support systems to run out.'

Liz shuddered. The thought of the craft as a sarcophagus for the bodies of its alien crew was a disturbing one. With an effort, she tried to be business-like. 'Well, we can't find out anything else here without more equipment. I suppose we can look around to see if the crew left any other traces around here.'

They did not have to look far. Twenty yards along the broad ledge they came upon a second piece of alien machinery half buried by dust and a large slab of fallen rock resting against it. The Doctor pushed the slab aside and they examined their new find.

Liz thought it looked like an abandoned oversized pneumatic road drill, with its chisel tip deeply embedded in the top of a conical mound of fine rock fragments. There were even two long handle-like projections jutting out from either side of the upper part of its cylindrical body, which was some five feet long. They had to scramble up the mound to peer at the top of the device. Here the resemblance to a road drill ceased, as there was a control panel on top with several flickering indicator lights burning feebly under a layer of dust and grime.

'It's still working!' Liz exclaimed. 'But what is it for?'

The Doctor studied the lights intently for a moment, then gave the whole device an experimental shove. It did not move.

'Probably some sort of emergency thermal-electric generator. A shaft has been drilled perhaps hundreds of yards down into the hot rocks under the volcano and a conductor lowered to the bottom. The temperature difference between there and the surface generates power. If it's been going long enough at high capacity, it might even have prematurely cooled the volcano and helped stabilize the crater.'

'But how long has it been working? And what for?'

The Doctor ran an experimental finger over the surface of the device, drawing a line in the dust. It was caked on thickly.

'Ten years?' he ventured. 'Twenty, fifty? I'm not sure, nor why. But however long it's been doing whatever it does, it won't for much longer. Look at that indicator flicker and fade.

Either the mechanism is failing or there's not enough thermal energy left to draw on.'

Liz looked down at the steadily steaming crater. 'But it's still pretty hot down there. How can it be running out of power?'

'It rather depends on how much it needs, doesn't it?' said the Doctor, significantly.

Liz felt the surroundings were becoming depressing and too full of unresolvable mysteries. It was frustrating to be without the proper tools to investigate in more detail. She needed some fresh air. She looked at the cliff behind them.

'Let's see if we can climb out of here. Who knows, perhaps the crew of the ship did the same and left some other equipment lying around?'

'All right, Liz,' agreed the Doctor. 'At least we should get a good view from up there.'

The Brigadier was still in the lab when Mike returned from the communications room, watching Osgood and his assistants begin the re-wiring in preparation for the new accumulators.

He was checking Liz's carefully written notes against the labelled switches and indicators on the visualizer control panel.

'Canberra have acknowledged our request, sir,' Mike reported. 'They'll get on to it at once and send the information as they find it.'

'Good,' the Brigadier acknowledged. He gestured at the device before him. 'You realize as there's nobody else better qualified, I might have to work this thing when the power is turned back on again, Yates. Assuming they're not waiting to be picked up again, that is.' He bent his head again.

'According to the notes, the far end, or whatever you call it, can be steered.'

'Yes, sir. I saw the Doctor do it.'

'Did you? Well you'd better stand by then, just in case.'

'I'm sure the Doctor and Miss Shaw will be all right, sir.'

'Of course they will,' the Brigadier asserted confidently.

‘Teach them a lesson for mucking about with this contraption.

Good for them to have to rough it for a night outdoors, eh?’

‘Quite, sir,’ Mike agreed. He wasn’t fooled. He could see the Brigadier was worried about the lost scientists but wouldn’t admit it. Underneath his reserve and occasional bluster, Mike guessed he was a real softie at heart.

There was a muffled curse and the clang of a dropped tool from the accumulator racks. Osgood had pinched his finger in his pliers. The Brigadier spun round, eyes blazing.

‘Great heavens, man! If you can’t even wire a plug properly I’ll find somebody who can, and you’ll be standing the next three months’ guard duty!’

Yes, just a big softie all right, thought Mike.

The climb to the top of the crater rim was not difficult, and the view was certainly rewarding. As Liz had suspected from the latitude and longitude of the time bridge portal, they found that a thickly forested island was spread out below them. It was about five miles long by three wide, and was encircled by the broken ring of a white foamed reef. Beyond, the sparkling blue waters of the Pacific rolled away to the horizon under a rapidly sinking tropical sun.

Except something didn’t look quite right.

Liz blinked several times. ‘Doctor, does everything get blurred a mile or so out from the reef, or are my eyes playing tricks?’

‘Your eyes are fine, Liz. There’s some sort of distortion field effect surrounding the island. It covers the sky as well.’

Squinting upward through her spread fingers, she saw what he meant. The sun seemed to shimmer slightly, and its image was smeared out and fuzzy round the edges.

‘This might be what that device back in the crater is doing,’

the Doctor speculated. ‘Projecting a low intensity force field that distorts light waves.’

‘What for?’

‘Well, if it’s adjusted properly, it could conceal the island from outside

observation.'

'Making the island invisible?'

'Not perfectly. But it would certainly make it less noticeable.'

'But who wants to hide a whole island?'

'More to the point, Liz, *why* do they want to hide a whole island?'

Benton entered the lab carrying a sheet of telex paper.

'First report from Canberra on the investigation, sir.' He handed the sheet to the Brigadier, who scanned the contents intently while he and Yates looked on. Suddenly the Brigadier stiffened in annoyance.

'Something wrong, sir?' Mike enquired anxiously.

'I might have known it,' the Brigadier said tersely.

'According to this, there is no known island at the coordinates we sent them. The Doctor and Miss Shaw have managed to lose themselves on a place that doesn't exist!'

Seven

hat night after dinner they all went out on deck with their dri

T nks again to watch the shimmer in the night air, where the mirage-like veil that cloaked the island caused the images of the moon and stars to blur and flicker. Nancy recalled the strange sensation of passing through that wall of haze, and seeing the island fade into being in what had seemed open ocean only moments before. 'There it is: the lost island of Salutua,' Sternberg had proudly announced. Well she wished it had stayed lost!

She heard Dodgeson exclaim: 'There! See! It almost cleared completely then. It's not steady all the time. Mighty peculiar. Wonder what causes it?'

'A remarkable phenomena,' Sternberg agreed, and launched into a discourse on 'refractivity indexes' and

'waveforms', which the rest listened to with polite incomprehension.

While they were diverted, Nancy approached Amelia and said in a low voice: 'We've got to talk. Not in front of the others.' Amelia frowned,

then nodded, and they made their way down the sloping deck towards the stern. It was not the first time they had settled disagreements in private. Neither wanted a scene that might hurt Grover.

Because of the angle at which they were beached, the stern deck of the *Constitution* was only a few feet above the sluggish waves, now that the tide was in. Nancy found it disconcerting to see the water so close, with the feeling they were about to tip over into it, but at least here she could look away from the island. She found its dark bulk rather sinister in the moonlight.

'Well, Nancy?' Amelia asked simply.

'Larry de Veer told me you are going to be acting as my stand-in until they can get a full crew here.'

'That's right. Wearing Anni and with the right clothes and one of your hairpieces, he thinks he can take some "long shots", as he calls them.' She smiled. 'It might be fun. What's the matter? I thought you'd be pleased the filming could get started quickly.'

'He said if you did well, he was thinking of writing you into the picture.'

'Oh, that! He talked about it, but I'm sure he was only joking.' She looked quizzically at Nancy. 'You don't think he was serious? Nancy, I can't act and I have no ambition to be in the movies. Anyway, who would go and see a one-armed actress?'

'Larry seems to think otherwise. Said it might be something different, something a bit daring. He started to spin a yarn about a girl who was washed up from a shipwreck after losing her arm to a shark, but still made good on an island full of monsters. That's *you* – the heroine of the whole film!'

'That's ridiculous.'

'Oh? He thought you might be interested in doing it because it would help all those charities for cripples you support. Show them you can still make it even if you are missing an arm – that sort of thing.'

'Well he never told me.'

'Really? He's trying to edge me out of the picture, ain't he?

And you're the only person who can do it for him, because Marshal

would back his precious daughter over me when it came to a choice!'

Amelia's voice became sterner. 'I am not trying to steal the picture from you, Nancy. I think you're becoming obsessed by the whole business.'

'Maybe I have to be. It's the only way to make it when you start where I did.'

'There's no need to bring that up. I've never held your roots against you, Nancy, you know that. I'm sorry if you feel otherwise.'

'Stop being so damn decent!' Nancy exploded. Amelia flinched away at the unexpected force of her reaction.

'You don't get it at all, do you?' Nancy continued, with a touch of contempt in her voice. 'You couldn't be like that where I grew up. You had to kick and grab or you got nothing and nowhere. Being decent's a luxury for those who had the breaks. You always could afford to give it out to everybody free, and don't they love you for it! Look at the crippled girl; she's so brave and uncomplaining and helpful even with no arm! 'Course, she still had a father with money and a fine house behind her. I had none of that!'

Amelia recovered her composure and did not rise to the accusation. Instead she said levelly: 'Possibly I was lucky, in a way – but that's another matter. In any case, you can't seriously believe I'm a threat to your career. Surely you've got everything you want now?'

'You can never have everything you want, because you never know how much you're going to need! You'd know that if you'd crawled up from the bottom like me.'

'Perhaps. As you pointed out, I'm not qualified to judge.'

'Clam it! You're being too reasonable again!'

'I can only be myself, Nancy.'

'Your sanctimonious self.'

'If you like. I make no secret of my belief, you know that.

Do you object?'

'Let's just say I've learnt to believe in myself first! Your God's never done me any favours that I've noticed.' Amelia's expression made

Nancy smile. ‘Does it shock you, talking like that? Maybe you should say a prayer for me.’

‘If you want me to.’

‘What I want you to do is –’

There was a shout from an upper deck that cut through her words: ‘Something moving in the water off the starboard quarter.’

‘Get a light on it!’

As they watched, a searchlight crackled into life and the beam swung round, probing the darkness and washing out the stars. Thrown into high relief they saw what appeared to be a flattish rock, perhaps four or five feet across, wallowing in the sluggish shallow waters some thirty yards away. At first there seemed no reason for the lookout’s alarm. Then Nancy realized the ‘rock’ was moving steadily towards the shore. Not being carried in by the waves, but progressing purposefully under its own power.

‘There’s another one!’

A second ‘rock’ came into view close to the first, also heading for the shore.

‘Lights!’ bellowed Captain Pascoe’s voice. ‘Get more lights all round!’ One by one, searchlights and lanterns sprang into life, flooding the beach with stark light and dancing shadows.

‘They’re portside too!’ someone exclaimed. They could now see at least a dozen of the objects, all making for the beach.

Amelia whispered breathlessly: ‘Can you hear something?’

Nancy realized she could. An odd sharp clicking noise, repeated several times. It seemed to be all around them, as though it were being transmitted through the water itself.

Then a hundred yards along the shore, transfixed by a searchlight beam, a ‘rock’ heaved itself out of the gentle wash of waves on eight jointed legs and stalked jerkily across the sand. It was a crab. Its shell, from which water was still streaming, was at least six feet across. Massive serrated claws clicked together menacingly, its arms flexing and weaving about almost as though it were beckoning to an invisible opponent; it reminded Nancy curiously of a boxer warming up for a

title fight. Another crab marched ashore to join the first.

Nancy stood beside Amelia at the rail, their differences temporarily forgotten, both captivated by the spectacle before them. Oddly, as she would recall afterwards, she felt no fear at that moment, only amazement and disbelief at the sight of the grotesque creatures. They seemed detached from the scene, like spectators at an aquarium.

Then there was a splash and rush of water almost at their feet, together with a heavy click and scraping sound. They spun about only to freeze in horror.

A huge claw had locked about a railing stanchion. Metal groaned. A crusted shell heaved into view. Stalked eyes bulged coldly towards them, while below twitching feeding palps worked hungrily about the crab's mouth. A second claw locked on to the railing, and the creature began to climb on to the deck.

At that the spell broke, and Nancy and Amelia both leapt backward. In her terror, Nancy barged into Amelia, knocking her against the rail, which she automatically grabbed at for support. There was a rending screech of metal as the bolts of a stanchion plate gave way under the crab's weight, and the beast toppled backward and disappeared with a terrific splash.

But its claw was still locked about the stanchion and it went as well, dragging ten feet of railing with it. Before she could let go and regain her balance, Amelia was catapulted over the side.

For a moment Nancy thought she had fallen into the water.

Then she saw one white-knuckled hand clasped desperately to the twisted rail as it sagged further out over the side.

'Nancy – help!'

And for one timeless, frozen moment Nancy hesitated, watching the clenched fingers slip along the rail.

'Please!'

Then sudden cries of alarm and the crack of a rifle from the main deck jerked her out of her spell. She reached out, just as Amelia's hold broke.

There was a slight quick splash.

Nancy leant over the rail.

‘Amelia!’

For a moment she could not see her in the confusion of lights dancing across the waves. The multiple crack of rifles began from somewhere forward, and she heard bullets smack into the water. Amelia’s head broke the surface and Nancy heard her choking. Ten yards away from her another humped crab shell appeared. Where was a life belt? There should be one on the railing. No, it had been torn away. Where was the next nearest? She had no idea, she couldn’t think. Why did it have to be up to her?

‘Get to the pontoon!’ she shouted. What else could she do?

Then she realized it was on the other side of the yacht.

Amelia had fallen in just on the port side of the stern. The pontoon was on the starboard side. Could Amelia get round the stern? There was a jerk on the other length of broken railing where it trailed into the water. The first crab was still there. It was trying to climb aboard again!

It was too much for her. Nancy ran. Up a stairway to the main deck, and into a confusion of light and noise. A haze of gunsmoke filled the air. Sailors were lining the rails, firing down into the sea. At the head of the accommodation ladder she saw a crab’s severed claw lying on the deck, and a sailor leaning over the rail swinging a fire axe.

Suddenly she collided with somebody and screamed in reflex, until she realized it was Grover.

‘Am...Amelia! She’s in the water...’ she managed to say.

She saw the colour drain from Grover’s face and he seemed ready to faint. And in that moment her concern for Amelia was chilled by the realization of what the possibility of losing his daughter meant to Grover. His expression told it all, and she knew, for all her charms, she could never instil such depth of love.

With a heroic effort, Grover recovered himself.

‘Where?’ he demanded.

‘The stern...other side..’

Grover shouted orders. Sailors ran across the deck. Lights were swung round. Nancy clung to Grover's arm and was dragged along until they were leaning over the port rail.

They were just in time to see Amelia struggling through the shallows only yards ahead of a giant crab. A hasty fusillade of fire broke out and bullets started to rebound from the creature's thick carapace, distracting it from its prey for a moment, but not halting it.

'Get a cargo net over the side!' Grover bellowed. 'Amy!

This way!'

But even as Amelia turned, Nancy saw another crab had emerged from the water and was working its way along the side of the ship, exploring the hull curiously, lifting itself up on many-jointed legs as though straining to reach the rails.

Even as gunfire began to rain down upon it, a third crab surfaced behind it, also following the line of the hull and effectively cutting Amelia off from the yacht.

Now the shoreline as far as their lights could reach was dotted with the giant creatures; the clicking of their claws setting up a ghastly clatter, and their odd beckoning arm gestures adding a macabre animation to the scene. Nancy realized the two ragged lines of crabs embraced the *Constitution* on both sides. Steadily, with an almost military purpose, they began to stalk forward, their two lines joining as they cleared the yacht, carelessly driving Amelia before them.

There was no time for a rescue and no way left for her to go, except one. With a desperate half wave, she stumbled away up the beach ahead of the advancing horde and disappeared between the palms into the darkness of the forest beyond.

'Are you ready *now*, Corporal?' the Brigadier demanded.

Osgood checked over the connections one last time. 'Yes, sir,' he announced. Mentally he crossed his fingers.

'And about time!' exclaimed the Brigadier, turning back to the visualizer control panel. Osgood pulled out a handkerchief and mopped the sweat off his brow.

It had been a hectic few hours. After receiving the first dispatch from Canberra, the Brigadier had decided that they couldn't afford to wait

for the new accumulators in case the Doctor and Liz were in trouble. He had remorselessly questioned Osgood about the power shortage until he had had to admit there might be *something* he could do. By charging the remaining accumulators to capacity, linking the heaviest live main he could run in to the transformers, and diverting most of the building's power, Osgood managed to bring the system up to working potential. Not enough, according to the figures Liz had carefully noted down, for more than a few seconds of full trans-temporal interface, but it might just be sufficient – assuming that the lost scientists were ready and waiting for the bridge to appear.

If they were not, that would be another problem, of course.

But at least, Osgood thought with relief, it would not be his.

Consulting Liz's notes, the Brigadier cautiously powered up the system. Osgood could see he was uncomfortable operating the complex machinery, but there was really no one better qualified, and the Brigadier was not the sort to shirk responsibility. Mike Yates stood by the TARDIS console, while Benton was positioned before the image coil to note any changes. The machinery hummed into life. Osgood watched the accumulators, replacement connections and rectifiers, and hoped none would fail under the load.

'Nothing yet,' Benton reported. 'Hold on, it's flickering.

Now it's gone grey. Ah, I can see it now. It's dark. Lots of black rocks and smoke. No sign of the Doc and Miss Shaw.'

'Try the light,' the Brigadier ordered.

Benton had a powerful hand-held mini-spotlight ready.

They guessed it would be night at the other end too by now, as the time of day had seemed approximately synchronous earlier. He shone it through the coil, the beam appearing to cross the time interface without noticeable attentuation. It illuminated rocks and steam, but nothing else.

'Still nothing, sir.'

'We'll try rotating the thing. Stand by.' Cautiously, he moved a large dial. The image within the coil wobbled and turned slowly until they made a complete circuit.

'Anything, Benton?'

‘I’m doing a fair impression of a lighthouse, sir, but that’s all. Maybe we need a foghorn,’ Benton suggested helpfully.

‘I didn’t hear any sound come through until it was on full power,’ Yates pointed out.

‘Well we can’t afford to experiment,’ said the Brigadier.

‘Power down to five percent.’ The image in the coil paled and became fuzzy. The Brigadier pursed his lips thoughtfully. ‘If they’re nearby, which they should be if they have any sense, they would have seen the light and come running. As they didn’t…’ He let the sentence hang ominously.

‘You think they might be in trouble, sir?’ Benton asked.

‘We must consider the possibility, Benton. The confounded nuisance is that we don’t know anything about the place.’

Osgood saw Mike take a deep breath. ‘Sir, we should have enough power for one person to go through if they’re quick about it. If it would help, I’m willing to try to find them, or at least make a reconnaissance for a larger party to follow on later.’ Osgood shook his head in dismay. First rule of army life, he thought to himself: never volunteer.

The Brigadier considered for a moment, regarding Mike keenly. ‘All right, Yates,’ he said at last. ‘Get yourself kitted out. Better take a gas mask by the looks of it. Back here as soon as you can.’

The rescue party had been assembled on the *Constitution*’s main deck within minutes of the last crab disappearing into the forest. All carried lanterns and were armed with rifles, and a couple shouldered packs of dynamite sticks.

Montgomery appeared from the direction of his cabin carrying his own sporting rifle. ‘Room for one more?’ he enquired lightly.

Grover eyed him doubtfully. ‘Sure you’re up to it?’

‘He’s drunk, Marshal, ignore him,’ Nancy said contemptuously. She had been hovering uncertainly on the edge of the activity, wrapped up in her private world of shame and resentment. It felt good to strike out, to highlight somebody else’s failings at that moment. It helped conceal her own.

Montgomery turned to her with unexpected composure.

‘Drunk or sober, Nancy, I’m still a damned good shot. I plugged an ant this morning right between –’

‘Okay, Montgomery,’ Grover said quickly. ‘We need every man we can spare. And thanks.’

‘He still wants to help, even though it might be dangerous,’

de Veer observed by Nancy’s side, in a low but not totally discreet tone. ‘But perhaps you’re not familiar with the concept that embodies?’

‘I don’t see you volunteering!’

‘I’m no hero and a rotten shot, I freely admit,’ he replied calmly. ‘But at least I don’t pretend to be what I’m not.’

With Grover at its head, the party tramped down the accommodation ladder to the heavily guarded pontoon and up the duckboarding to the now deserted beach, which was pockmarked with the tracks of the crabs. In a half a minute the rescuers had also disappeared into the forest.

‘You know, Doctor,’ said Liz conversationally, ‘I was planning to wash my hair tonight, then watch a documentary on BBC2. I really didn’t expect to spend it marooned on a Pacific island in nineteen thirty-four!’

‘Oh. What was the documentary about?’ the Doctor enquired mildly.

Liz grimaced. ‘Popular theories about the possibility of time travel, if you must know.’ The Doctor raised a curious eyebrow. ‘I thought it might be amusing,’ she responded defensively.

They had made a camp on the crater rim and had lit a brushwood fire to keep away the insects. Liz reckoned the time bridge would not be repaired at least until morning, so they might as well be comfortable. The still and heavy night had dampened the air circulation within the crater, making it no place to rest. So the Doctor had left a note where the time portal should materialize, explaining where they were just in case. Now all they could do was wait.

It was as she turned over for the fifth time, trying to get comfortable, that the distant echoes of gunfire drifted across the island.

The Doctor sprang to his feet alertly, striding forward and shielding his eyes from the glare of their fire. Liz rose more uncertainly, peering into the darkness. Unconsciously she had assumed the island must be deserted, otherwise the spaceship could not have lain apparently untouched for so long. Now it seemed she had been wrong. She *knew* things were going to get complicated. They always did when the Doctor was around.

'There,' he said suddenly. 'Lights on the shore, I think.

Can't see them directly – the trees must be in the way.'

Yes, Liz could see them now. Pale intermittent flickers lighting up the sky and the occasional suggestion of a beam, as though a searchlight had been pointed briefly upward. A couple of miles away at least, she estimated. For another two minutes the gunfire continued almost unabated. Then it trailed sporadically away into an uneasy silence, and they were left straining their eyes and ears for any further disturbance.

It came quite unexpectedly.

The Doctor suddenly winced, and clapped his hands over his ears.

'What's wrong?' Liz asked in alarm. Then she heard it herself: a shrill cry falling in pitch and entering her range of hearing. Then came another, and another, until the whole island seemed to be alive with the ghastly shrieks and wails.

She saw the Doctor, grim faced, take out his sonic screwdriver and adjust its settings. Then he picked up the torch and turned towards her.

'Maybe you'd better stay here –' he began.

'Not on your life,' Liz retorted hotly. 'I'm coming with you!' She picked out the first aid kit from the Doctor's pack and stood ready.

The Doctor gave a half-smile. 'I rather thought you would.

But please stay alert. And remember, if in doubt...'

'Yes?'

'Don't be too proud to run away!'

They set off down the gentle slope of the volcano towards the

straggling edge of the forest.

Mike was back in the laboratory within fifteen minutes. He had already compiled a mental list of what he needed before making his offer to the Brigadier, and he had wasted no time in gathering it. He was well aware of the risk he was taking, and equally certain he was not acting out of bravado or a foolish attempt to impress. A job needed doing and he thought he was the best equipped for it.

He was now wearing lightweight tropical camouflage dress, together with a basic pack and medical kit. Slung over his shoulder was a compact sub-machine-gun with a folding stock, while on his belt were clipped several spare magazines and a couple of grenades. In his hand was a gas mask ready to put on.

'Ready, sir,' he announced.

'Right you are, Yates,' the Brigadier acknowledged briskly. 'Remember we should be fully operational again in eighteen hours at the outside, but we'll keep a continuous watch on low power. No point in taking a radio, even if it works through this thing, because the crater walls would shield it. If you find the Doctor and Miss Shaw galavanting about somewhere, get them back to the crater and keep them there. You can tell them it's on my orders, and don't stand for any nonsense. Any questions?'

'No, sir.'

'Then off you go – and good luck!'

Mike crossed to stand before the visualizer coil, pulling on his gas mask. Benton gave him a slap on the shoulder and a thumbs-up. Mike snapped on his torch, his other hand resting lightly on his gun. The system powered up, and the image within the coil grew sharper.

'Counting down for full power,' the Brigadier announced.

'Three, two, one, *go*!' He twisted a dial hard over.

The image solidified in the coil and Mike jumped through.

There was a slight tingle, which might have been his imagination, and then he was in the steamy darkness of the crater.

Behind him the time portal hung unsupported a few inches above the ground, the glow of the laboratory lights fanning out across the rocks.

The images of Benton and the Brigadier were already blurred again since the power had been reduced.

He gave a reassuring wave, then cautiously moved forward, probing the gloom with his torch.

He came upon a low cairn of stones after only a few paces.

The note on top had been moistened by the steam and plastered itself to the rock, which was why they had not seen it from the other side of the portal:

SELF AND MISS SHAW CAMPED FOR THE NIGHT ON

CRATER RIM AS INTERIOR INSALUBRIOUS. IF YOU

RESTORE TIME BRIDGE BEFORE DAYBREAK, THE

WAY UP IS TO THE RIGHT OF THE SPACESHIP.

THE DOCTOR.

To the right of what? Still, Mike was relieved. At least it explained why they hadn't seen the searchlight. There was an arrow made from loose pebbles beside the cairn, and he followed on in the direction indicated. Soon he was scaling the shelving ledges of the crater wall, where he came suddenly upon the dark mass of the alien spaceship. Undeniably the jackpot, he conceded, playing his torch over it curiously for a moment.

He found the cleft in the rocks that formed a path up the cliff. The air got clearer as he ascended and he removed his gas mask. A scattering of stars and a bright moon became visible. As he topped the rise he saw the glow of a campfire and opened his mouth to call out. Then distant sounds came to his ears which caused him automatically to swing his gun round to the ready.

Somewhere out in the moonlit forest stretching away below him, a battle was being fought.

There was a steady barrage of rifle shots, punctuated intermittently by the boom and crump of high explosives. But most unnerving was the clamour that backed these familiar sounds. A terrible cacophony of ear-splitting screams and shrieks that sent a shiver down his spine. What on Earth could make such sounds? He thought of the vessel in the crater behind him. Perhaps it was not of Earth at all!

‘Doctor! Miss Shaw!’ he called out. There was no reply.

Staying alert, he jogged across to the camp. There was no sign of them, but the well-built fire suggested they had not been gone long. But where had they gone? Into the thick of it, of course, and no doubt quite unprepared. He sighed, beginning to understand the Brigadier’s often expressed exasperation with civilians and scientists. Then he squared his shoulders and started off down the slope towards the sounds of battle.

Amelia stumbled on through the moonlit forest.

At first, when she had been forced to flee before the crabs, she had thought she might be able to get round their flank and make her way back to the beach. But the giants had kept up a remorselessly steady pace, picking their way with surprising delicacy between the great trees. The snapping of their claws was ever at her heels, and it took all her energy simply to stay ahead of them. Then the terrible shrieking had begun.

It had sounded disturbing enough the previous night when she was safe onboard the *Constitution*. But now, lost amidst the shadows of the forest, it was horrifying. It seemed to come from all sides at once, disorientating her. She wanted to escape from it, but which way should she go?

She ran desperately, bruised and scratched, her clothes torn by numerous falls over root tendrils. Shelter! She had to find some sort of shelter – sanctuary from the ripping claws of the crabs and from the unknown shriekers. And then, distantly, she heard the sound of gunfire once more, interspersed with occasional explosions. The fight had resumed. Were the crabs attacking the ship again? Should she try to head back towards the sound, or would that only invite more trouble? No, the most sensible thing to do was hide and wait.

A long dark shape blocked her path. A fallen tree. Dimly she could make out a slight hollow in the ground under it.

Surely the crabs, with their great bulk, would not be able to reach her there.

Amelia went down on her knees and scrabbled and slithered forward. She felt the rotted remains of a branch under her, covered by vines and dead leaves. Suddenly her outstretched hand pushed through the debris and she fell forward heavily, her arm disappearing up to her shoulder.

She could feel nothing below her!

With a crack and snap of wood the ground gave way and she dropped into the blackness of a pit.

Eight

rover had led the rescue party half a mile into the forest, t

G railing the line of stalking crabs and desperately watching for any sign of Amelia, when they heard the first cry. It froze them in their tracks. In their haste they had completely forgotten the mysterious shriekers. It took an effort to press on but they did so, if more warily. Minutes passed. The cries were repeated, growing in strength, a chorus beginning to form as it had the night before.

Then they caught up with the crabs. They had halted their advance, and were shortening their line, emerging from the trees on either side to converge on a moonlit glade barely a hundred yards ahead. It was almost as though a challenge had been issued, calling them to that spot. A challenge to battle.

The shrieking chorus redoubled in volume. The crabs responded with a clatter of snapping claws.

'I don't get it,' hissed Ferraro, clasping his gun ever tighter and peering round intently. 'I still can't see what's making all the racket. Where are they?' He sounded angry rather than frightened, and Grover admired his nerve.

'I don't know, but we'd better try to get round them or else

_'

He saw a flicker of motion over the cluster of crabs, as though a shadow had fallen to earth. Then another and another. He had the impression of silent wings spread, of half gliding forms. The huge crustaceans suddenly began to rear and twist and flail about them with their claws. Dark shapes as large as men were suddenly clinging to their backs, clawing and biting.

'Bats! They're in the trees! Watch out!'

A shriek of almost tangible intensity cut through them. A dark form dropped out of the night on to a sailor and bore him to the ground in a shroud of black leathery wings. He gave a cry of terror that choked off in a bloody gurgle. Before his comrades could aid him there was another shriek, as mind-numbing as the first. Grover saw a bat, wings outstretched, flash through a moonbeam. For an instant he took in a face dominated by a huge nose formed of intricately folded leaves of flesh, below which gaped a jaw full of needle fangs.

Ferraro snapped off a shot and the creature fell out of the air with a cry of pain.

Then it seemed to rain bats, and suddenly the rescue party was scattering in confusion through the trees, its individual members fighting for their lives.

A bat flopped to the ground before Grover, mouth gaping.

The shrill intensity of its cry cut through his body like a buzz-saw. It resonated inside his skull, driving reason from his mind and reducing him to a trembling, stupefied wretch.

Vision blurring, he dimly saw the hideous thing that was the source of the intolerable sound as it hopped awkwardly towards him. Fearfully he cowered from it, and, drawing on every scrap of willpower, he raised his rifle and fired.

There was a scream of pain. The terrible sound died. His mind cleared. He fired again and again until the creature lay still.

Shaken, he looked around, trying to make sense of what was happening.

The bats were too big to fly properly and clumsy on the ground, but they had a weapon that more than compensated for those shortcomings. He would never have believed that sound could be used in such a manner, but now he understood.

It engendered fear, it confused the mind. It could even kill.

He saw a half-circle of five or six bats shrieking in unison at a single crab. The beast swayed, snapping at them futilely with its claws, its legs on one side working madly churning the earth, but the other side of its body apparently paralysed and dragging it down, causing it to flail around in a maddened circle. The shrieks oscillated, as though searching the scale.

Suddenly there was a sharp crack as they struck the deadly resonance and its shell split. The crab jerked and collapsed and was still.

The forest for as far as Grover could see was a nightmare confusion of hulking shapes half seen in the scattered shafts of moonlight, punctuated by brilliant flashes of wildly swinging torches. Men fought crab and bat, even as the beasts fought each other. Then came a sudden flash and boom of dynamite.

Pieces of crab and twisted shards of bat wing flew through the air. Over the bedlam he heard Ferraro shouting orders, trying to gather the men together and get a tree at their backs. Only then could they shoot without fear of hitting comrades and use their explosives to greatest effect. Grover stumbled towards the ring of men and added his rifle to their fire. He found Montgomery beside him, blazing away at the monsters surrounding them with wild enthusiasm.

‘What sport, eh, Grover?’ he shouted, as he paused to reload.

Between the trees he saw a lone sailor plucked off the ground in the pincers of a crab and cut almost in two. Ferraro snatched another stick of dynamite from a pack, lit its short fuse, and tossed it under the crab. The explosion blew off its legs and the creature collapsed grotesquely.

The primeval conflict raged about the huddled knot of survivors, pressing them back to the great tree. If there had been a chance to escape they would have taken it, but there was no clear path. The best they could hope for was to keep the warring beasts clear until the battle was over or moved away. But then, from out of the darkness, they heard the shouts and screams of those sailors that had been separated from the main group.

Grover heard Ferraro curse. ‘We’ve got to go after them!

We can’t leave them to die!’

‘It’ll be suicide, man!’ Grover shouted back above the gunfire and shrieking. ‘This is the best shelter we’ve got.’

‘No! We can make it if we stick together and watch our backs.’ His eyes blazed. ‘I’ve never turned my back on a shipmate yet, and I’m not starting now!’

Grover saw he was absolutely resolute, and could not help but admire his courage.

‘All right, Ferraro. We’ll try it.’

And then came a new sound.

It was like the bat’s cry but subtlety altered: rising and falling in waves, as though a beam of sound was being swung back and forth across the forest, as one would swing a torch.

And as it did so the shrieks of the bats faltered and died, and the crabs turned about uncertainly, as though suspicious of some new foe. The sound increased in intensity, and the beasts began to shuffle uneasily. The bats hopped towards the trees and, digging into the bark with sharp claws, began to climb back to their roosts. The crabs clicked and stalked away into the shadows, heading for the beach once more, and in moments the last wounded survivors had dragged themselves out of sight.

The forest was still again. The only sign that the incredible battle had ever occurred was the dead of both species that littered the ground, along with the bodies of men.

A man and woman appeared through the trees. The man was casting about him with some device he was holding in his outstretched arm. Each time it pointed at them they could feel a shrill of sound. It made them want to fall back before it, but they held their ground. Suddenly the sound cut off as the man pocketed the device and the two strangers advanced towards them. Ferraro pointed his torch. Grover saw the man had a shock of white hair, a long face, and a prominent nose.

Incongruously, he was dressed in a dark velvet jacket with a frilly shirt collar. His companion wore a short white lab coat, below which were odd calf-length boots. Her mass of blonde hair curled, and was pinned up high on her head.

The strange man spoke. His tone was deep and concerned, and oddly reassuring. It made Grover think of his father.

'Sorry we couldn't reach you sooner, but it's a trifle hard to find one's way in this place.'

'You're English? What are you doing here? And how did you chase off those creatures?'

'Later, old chap. Hadn't you better find out if any of your companions have survived? All we've seen are bodies so far, but there's a chance –'

'Yes, of course. Ferraro, spread the men out. Circle the glade...' Grover paused to wipe his brow as the sailors began their search. 'It was that dreadful noise,' he explained. 'Makes it hard to think straight. I'm not usually as slow as this.'

'I quite understand, my dear fellow,' said the stranger considerately. 'By the way, this is Doctor Elizabeth Shaw –

Liz to her friends – and I'm, er, Doctor Smith.'

'Though everybody just calls him the Doctor,' his companion said helpfully.

Grover introduced himself, recovering something of his normal self-possession. 'Where did you come from? We'd have seen anyone enter the lagoon, unless you got here before us.'

‘No, we only arrived a few hours ago,’ admitted the Doctor.

‘We landed, uh, elsewhere on the island,’ Elizabeth Shaw added. ‘And when we heard all that shrieking from our camp, we thought we’d better investigate.’

‘But how did you find Salutua in the first place?’ Grover asked. Now he was over his initial surprise, he was beginning to wonder about the two newcomers.

‘Believe me,’ said Doctor Shaw with feeling, casting an odd glance at her companion, ‘it wasn’t easy.’

‘Yes, a most singular island,’ the Doctor continued heartily. ‘And you’re investigating it as well, I suppose.’

‘Only in a small way,’ Grover said quickly. ‘Mostly, we’re here to shoot a motion picture.’

‘Really, how interesting.’ The Doctor brightened. ‘You haven’t got anybody I know in it, I suppose? Dougie Fairbanks Senior, perhaps? No, he never managed the transition to the talkies, did he.’

‘Doctor!’ his companion said sharply.

‘Quite so. Reminiscences later. You’ll want to get on now.

What were you doing out here in the middle of the night, by the way?’

‘My daughter, Amelia. She’s lost out here somewhere.’

‘Then as soon as you’ve gathered your men together you must keep searching for her, of course. We’ll help.’

‘Thanks, Doctor. And for getting rid of those creatures.’

The Doctor smiled. ‘Don’t mention it, old chap, it was my pleasure.’

Mike Yates paused as the sounds of the conflict died away and the normal rustles and chirpings of the forest night closed in around him. He had planned to approach the battleground unobserved, guided and concealed by the noise, and not reveal, himself until he found what it was about and whether the Doctor or Liz were involved. Now it looked as though he might lose that advantage. Should he press on in the same direction and try to stay hidden, or wait awhile and see what else he could hear? If only it had been a straightforward search he could have fired his gun at regular intervals to attract the missing

scientists' attention. But the fight, whatever it had been about, had made him cautious.

It was as he was debating the problem that he heard a faint, muffled cry drifting through the forest.

'Help...anybody...please help me...'

It sounded like a woman's voice.

He moved forward silently. The cries got louder but remained muffled. Where were they coming from? Should he risk calling back? He saw a fallen tree looming out of the darkness. The voice was much louder but still oddly distant.

'Help me...please...'

The cry was so plaintive he had to respond.

'Hallo. Where are you?'

'Oh, thank goodness...' There was a half-sob, then more distinctly: 'I'm in some sort of cave or pit under the fallen tree. Be careful, the ground's not safe.'

Mike got down flat, fitted the bayonet to his machine-gun, and inched forward, probing ahead with it. In the shadows under the tree he saw a ragged circle of deeper darkness.

Cautiously he shone his torch across it, shielding the beam as much as possible.

'Can you see my light?'

'Yes, yes I can.'

'How deep are you?'

'About twenty feet, I think.'

'All right. I'm going to make a line fast before I come any closer, just in case.'

'I understand...but please hurry...I think there's something alive down here.'

'Can't you keep away from it?'

‘No…I can’t move.’

Mike went cold. ‘Are you badly hurt? Is it your back.?’

‘No…it sounds silly, but I’m…stuck to something.’

‘What?’

‘It feels like a lot of ropes –’ There was a sudden gasp. ‘It’s coming closer!’

Mike grabbed a trailing vine for some slight support and slithered rapidly over to the hole, feeling the flimsy covering of dead branches and matted vines sag as he did so, and shone his torch downward. A few creepers and tree roots hung free around the hole, fringing his view. Almost directly below the pale face of a young woman with dark hair shone back at him, blinking in the torchlight. She was wearing the tattered and stained remains of what had been an evening dress, and was sprawled on a webwork of faintly glistening strands that stretched away into the darkness, tilted slightly backwards.

Then the web trembled, but the woman had not moved. She twisted her head around and screamed. Mike swung the light to follow her gaze.

The spider picking its way delicately across the web was furred with thick black hair. The span of its outstretched legs must have been over eight feet.

Mike fired a three second burst with his machine-gun even as he felt the ground under him give way. He dropped the torch and grabbed at a shaggy tree root, swinging free and slithering almost to its end before it snapped. He hit the ground clear of the web and rolled to break his fall before coming to rest. For a moment he lay still, shaken, and slightly winded. His rubberized shockproof torch bounced to a halt a few feet away, its light splashing across a blank wall of ribbed rock, curving up and over his head.

‘Are you all right?’ the woman called out anxiously.

‘Just about. Did I hit it?’

‘Yes…at least, I think so.’

Mike hastily scrabbled for his torch and flashed it towards her. The remains of the spider hung on the web. The burst of automatic fire

had severed several limbs and had separated its head from its thorax. Dripping body fluids gleamed stickily.

Mike gratefully turned the torch back on the young woman.

'Right,' he said reassuringly. 'I'll have you free of that in a moment.'

'Be careful, it's very sticky. I think if you can just pull slowly and evenly I can get loose. I can't get any purchase by myself.'

'Okay, let's get your arms clear first.'

Then he caught his breath. He thought her left arm was folded behind her, but now he saw the sleeve of her evening dress torn and empty. 'Your arm!' he said in dismay.

'It's all right. I lost it in an accident years ago.'

'Thank goodness for that! No, I don't mean...What I meant was I thought...' He trailed off awkwardly.

'I think I know what you meant,' she replied quietly. For a moment he thought he had offended her, then he saw she was smiling.

They looked into each other's faces and suddenly broke into mutual laughter. Mike was relieved to see the lifting of tension in the woman's face. Gently, he reached up and took her right arm and began to pull it away from the web. It came slowly free, trailing strings like half-set glue. He started work on releasing her head.

'We haven't been introduced,' she said, wincing as her hair caught on the web. 'I'm Amelia Grover.'

'How do you do,' replied Mike with a smile, trying to match her composure. 'Sergeant Mike Yates, British Army, at your service. Presently on attachment to...' He remembered just in time that the United Nations did not exist in 1934: '...a special scientific unit.'

'But Salutua is in French territory. What is the British Army doing here? Actually, I didn't think there was *anybody* here but us.'

'Supporting an, er...international research project,' Mike said vaguely. It was close enough to the truth. 'We've only just got here. Set up a small camp on the mountain.' He eased her torso free of the web, allowing her to sit forward. 'But presently I'm searching for a couple of our scientists who've gone missing. At least, that's what I was doing

when I heard you calling. You haven't seen anything of them, I suppose.'

'No, I'm sorry,' said Amelia. 'I do hope they're safe.'

'So do I,' Mike replied dryly.

He tugged some more web free of her dress, then said: 'If you can hold on to my shoulders, I think I can pull the rest of you free.'

Awkwardly she clasped her arm about him as he suggested.

'Do you often manage to induce girls to embrace you so soon after you've been introduced, Sergeant Yates?'

'It's a technique I've been working on,' Mike responded in kind.

Amelia came loose from the web with a brief tearing of cloth.

'Sorry,' Mike said, carefully setting her down.

'It's all right, Sergeant, you couldn't help it.' She took a couple of steps, winced, and looked down. Mike realized her stockings were hanging in tattered ribbons about her ankles and her bare feet were caked in dirt and streaks of blood.

'I seem to have lost my shoes,' she said, almost dreamily.

Mike caught her as she started to sway and gently laid her back against the curve of the tunnel wall. He recognized the signs. A reaction to her ordeal and rescue was beginning to set in. He unslung his pack and took out his canteen.

'Here, drink this.'

'I'm so sorry,' she said faintly. 'I thought I was going to be all right.'

'You just rest and get your strength back for a minute while I see to your feet.' He took out the first aid pack, and started cleaning and dressing her injuries. None seemed too serious, but he knew the dangers of leaving even minor wounds untreated in the tropics. 'It looks as though you've been running for some way. What happened?'

'Well, we're here to make a film. I was on my father's yacht – it's aground in the lagoon – and was on deck when...'

Mike listened to Amelia's story with mounting concern.

Giant crabs, snakes, ants, mysterious shriekers: what a place for the Doctor and Miss Shaw to end up in! He had to find them as soon as possible and get them back home safely. Then perhaps they could discover just what had happened on Salutua in some less perilous and better planned manner. First, though, he had to get Amelia Grover and himself out of this hole in the ground.

He finished by cutting strips off his plastic groundsheet and binding them around Amelia's feet. At least it should protect his first aid work and allow her to walk far enough to get back to her yacht. He hoped she wouldn't notice the unfamiliar material, or for that matter, any other anachronistic details of his uniform or kit. Instinctively he realized that it would be far simpler if she never knew where, or when, he was from. He wondered if all time travellers felt this urge for secrecy.

His work complete, he helped her up, watching her anxiously.

'It's all right,' she assured him. 'I'm feeling much better now. I'm not usually the fainting type, you know. But I do look a sight,' she added, looking ruefully down at her plastic-wrapped feet and her ragged skirt, through which her equally dirty and torn slip could be seen. She tried to pull some of the longer tears together. 'This dress is hardly decent anymore.'

'According to the best Paris fashion houses, the freshly torn hem is the new jungle look this year,' Mike assured her sincerely.

'Does the British Army train all its sergeants in reassuring light banter for embarrassing situations?'

'The first thing we learn,' Mike confirmed, 'after which end of the gun is the dangerous one, of course.'

She laughed, then frowned in annoyance as she found her hand was still sticking to the fabric of her dress. 'It's that glue from the web,' she exclaimed, pulling it free with difficulty.

'However am I going to manage without sticking to everything I touch?'

Mike indicated the floor of the tunnel with his torch beam.

'May I suggest a roll in the dust to dry it up, pro tem?'

'Also recommended by Paris, no doubt,' said Amelia, kneeling down

and smearing the powdery dirt over her, then lying on her back and wriggling in it as decorously as possible.

Mike turned his torch around to examine the walls of the pit. ‘And then we’ll see about getting out of here.’ He flashed the torch in the opposite direction to the web. ‘You know, this place looks more like a tunnel. I wonder if…What the –’

He swung his gun up to the ready. Amelia scrambled to her feet at his exclamation and gasped in horror. A huge form was looming out of the blackness.

The telephone in the laboratory rang just as they were making another rotation of the time bridge portal in an attempt to attract Mike Yates’s attention, so far without success.

The receiver was passed to the Brigadier, who listened for a while with a curious expression on his face, then said curtly:

‘By all means send it over. I’ll put my specialist on to it as soon as I can, but he’s rather, er…tied up in another investigation at present. Goodbye.’

Benton put down his searchlight. ‘Still no sign of him.’ He raised a polite eyebrow. ‘Something up, sir?’

‘Probably nothing, Benton. That was put through from UNIT, New York. Bit of a UFO panic over West Coast America. Except these seem to be acting like frightened ghosts. There one minute, gone the next. They’ll relay some film of them when it’s available.’

‘Just the sort of mystery the Doc and Miss Shaw would like, sir,’ Benton observed.

‘Exactly what New York thought, Benton,’ agreed the Brigadier, looking round the laboratory and thinking of his comfortable bed at home. ‘Scientists! Where are they when you need them?’

‘So why did a beautiful woman like yourself decide to become a scientist?’ Michael Montgomery asked Liz in a low voice, while peering alertly into the darkness as they tramped on through the forest.

Liz sighed. In the reflected light of the sailors’ lanterns about them, she could see a look in the actor’s eye that she was all too familiar with.

‘To search for an answer to the great mystery of the universe, of course,’ she replied smoothly.

‘Oh, and what’s that?’

‘Why men keep asking me that same silly question and always seem surprised at the answer!’

‘Ah…and what’s that?’

‘Because I like doing it, of course.’

Perhaps she was being unfair to him. It was a terribly dated chat-up line, but possibly it was still fresh in 1934.

The rescue party continued with their search through the forest. Every few minutes they paused to fire three shots at regular intervals and listen for any response from Amelia Grover. They moved forward with understandable caution, having lost six men to the crabs and bats and with several others who had sustained minor wounds, which Liz had treated as best she could from the first aid box. But there was no treatment for Marshal Grover’s mounting despair over his daughter, and she could see the fear growing heavier with every step. Even Montgomery seemed aware of it, and offered the only form of solace he could, which was another swig from his hip flask, bolstering his own spirits in a similar manner.

They had been searching for an hour before Liz realized, with a mild shock, that she had actually seen a few of Montgomery’s films. The memory of a slightly grainy black and white image and a rather flat and crackly soundtrack was so different from seeing the man in the flesh that it had taken some time for the connection to form. She was actually marching through the jungle with one of the original stars of the silver screen. Pity he had turned out to be a mildly lecherous drunk. Oh well, another illusion shattered.

Then the Doctor, who was in the lead beside Grover, called them to a halt.

‘Hallo, what’s this?’

Liz moved up beside him as torches were shone down on the ground before them.

A track had been made through the forest across their own path, but it was not that of an animal. Two parallel sets of tread-like indentations,

about six feet apart, ran between the huge trees, occasionally flattening small shrubs and bushes.

'It looks like a small tank,' Liz exclaimed, squatting down to test the depth of the impressions. 'Heavy for its size, too, judging by the compression.'

'About ten tons, I estimate,' said the Doctor. 'And quite fresh. Certainly made within the last few hours.' He turned to Grover. 'This is not from any of your equipment, I trust?'

'No, we've got nothing with us that would make tracks like that. What is it?'

Liz and the Doctor exchanged a meaningful glance.

'Well it suggests,' the Doctor said carefully, 'that there may be somebody, or something, else on the island besides ourselves.'

Grover gaped at them in renewed alarm. 'What, Doctor? Is it dangerous? You must tell me if it has any bearing on finding Amelia.'

'I really don't know yet, my dear fellow. But I recommend we proceed carefully.' He looked thoughtfully up and down the line of the tracks. 'This trail seems to run for some way.

Whatever it was came up from the direction of the beach but began to circle round, perhaps returning there again. It might be useful to find what the purpose of their excursion was.'

'You can follow them if you like, Doctor,' said Grover.

'I'm not about to abandon the search for Amelia.'

'But it is possible that she has also come across these tracks by now. Being an easy path she might have followed them and already be back at your yacht waiting for you. Look, quite frankly, you and your men seem utterly exhausted. Why not return to base, get some fresh men and start again if necessary? It will soon be dawn now anyway. You might be able to pick up your daughter's trail better in daylight.'

Although his instinct clearly told him to push on regardless, Liz could see Grover recognized the sense of the Doctor's suggestion.

'You may be right, Doctor. Ferraro, let's head back to the ship.'

Coffee had just been handed round to the men in the laboratory, when

Benton entered. Osgood could see from the expression on his face that he was the bearer of bad news.

'You'd better see this yourself, sir,' Osgood heard him say tersely, as he handed the Brigadier a slip of telex paper. The Brigadier's face became stoney as he read the document.

'You'd better check with Canberra that these details are correct, Benton.'

'I took the liberty of doing that already, sir. They've been confirmed.'

Osgood couldn't help asking: 'Bad news, sir?'

Stiffly, the Brigadier glanced at his watch. 'Assuming the same time of day at the other end, Osgood, we must recover the Doctor, Miss Shaw and Sergeant Yates within twenty hours at the outside. If we don't, they'll all be dead!'

Nine

ancy had gone to her cabin and lain on the bed. She Nsimply couldn't face anybody at the moment. She was beginning to believe everything was her fault, and wanted to hide her face in case somebody read the truth on it.

They had heard the shooting and explosions not long after the search party had disappeared into the jungle, and were not sure what to make of it. Perhaps the crabs had been annihilated. But what about the screamers? Then the remains of the crab army had returned to the lagoon and, presumably, back out to sea. They had waited expectantly, but there was no sign of the rescuers. Captain Pascoe had decided that they could do nothing until morning. Only a skeleton crew, together with some of the Chinese stewards, had been left to guard the ship as it was. She had seen Chow, their cook, pacing the deck holding a gleaming meat cleaver.

'Don't you worry, lady,' he had assured her. 'Any crab come back here, he become crab soup!'

As the time passed, de Veer had seemed to lose interest in taunting her, and Sternberg had gone to analyse the severed crab claw left from the first attack. She had felt suddenly lonely, and had even begun to miss having Montgomery around to trade insults with. So she had gone to her cabin. She hadn't expected to sleep, but she was more tired than she had realized.

The dreams were terrible: the loss of everything she had, over and over again – her recurring nightmare. But now a new element had been added: guilt. Guilt over Amelia.

She had paused for that fraction of a second before reaching out to help her. She tried to pretend it would not have made any difference, but in her heart she knew she could have pulled her back on deck again. But it wasn't her fault! She simply had no altruistic instincts. She had to make herself react in such circumstances, almost taking a pride in her hard, pragmatic self-centredness. It had always served her so well –

up till now.

But now it looked like it might have led to tragedy.

Because of a second's hesitation, Grover might have got himself killed going after Amelia. To her surprise she realized that she would actually miss him.

She might even miss Amelia.

Sorry, Amelia – damn you!

'What an awful statue,' Amelia Grover said with some feeling, staring at the huge shape that almost filled the tunnel.

Mike agreed with her. He also resented whoever had built it having placed it right where it could give them the maximum shock.

The figure was a good eighteen feet high, and looked like a rather crudely fashioned model of a man. Its upraised arms, which had given the form such a menacing aspect at first sight, were lifted in the direction of the hole in the roof, as though in worship. Its hands, however, were poorly modelled, and seemed to have six fingers. In fact the whole figure was oddly proportioned, almost abstract in style, with a humped back and overlarge, flattened feet. Stick-like ribs ran up the outside of its legs, as though the builders needed to add extra bracing to keep it upright. The surface of the statue was covered in a film of dirt and dust, suggesting it had been there for many years. Underneath the dust, the statue was uniformly dark in colour. Mike felt the texture of one tree-trunk-thick leg. It did not feel like stone. Though it was cold, there was a slight suggestion of pliability. Perhaps the statue wasn't solid after all, but formed from a skin of mud or clay, reinforced by dried grass fibres for binding, laid over an inner framework.

Mike stood back and shone his torch up at the statue's head again. This was a fairly smooth dome, with a few surreal bulges on it in odd places. A circle of fine mesh, possibly gauze, partially covered what was, for want of a better word, the statue's face. A severe down-turned slash represented the mouth, while two widespread 'V' shaped slits where the cheekbones should have been were presumably intended for nostrils. But the entire countenance was dominated by a single inset ruby-red eye almost the size of a football. When he moved his torch, it brought forth odd sparkles from within its depths. He couldn't believe it was actually a ruby, and guessed it was some type of volcanic glass.

Amelia Grover shuddered. 'I'm glad I didn't realize that thing was here all the time I was caught on the web,' she said with feeling.

He grinned in sympathy. 'He'd win no prizes in a beauty show, that's for sure. I remember legends and fairy tales about giant statues with gems for eyes, but I never thought I'd ever see one. Must tell the Doctor about old cyclops here –

assuming I can find him, that is.'

'The Doctor?'

'Our scientific advisor. He and Miss Shaw, another scientist, are the ones I was looking for earlier.'

'And you must continue searching as soon as possible, Sergeant,' Amelia said briskly. 'And I must get back to my father. He's sure to be terribly worried about me.' She shook her head as though to clear her thoughts. 'I think I heard some more fighting just before I fell down here, but that terrible shrieking made it so hard to concentrate –' Her face suddenly paled. 'Oh no, suppose it was a party out looking for me?

What if my father...I must find him!'

Mike spoke with all the authority he could muster. 'Listen you don't undertake a search just like that. For a start, you can't walk far without proper shoes. The first priority is to get you back to your yacht and find out what's *actually* happened, then take it from there. Agreed?'

She took a deep breath. 'You're quite right, Sergeant.

Thank you for being so sensible.'

‘Anytime,’ he said, with a slight smile. ‘Now, we both want to get out of here.’ He shone his torch up to the hole in the roof. ‘Unfortunately that might not be quite so simple.

None of those hanging vines and roots look strong enough to climb, even if I could reach them.’

‘You said you had a rope.’

‘Yes, but even with some sort of grapple, the edge of the hole’s not solid enough to hold it firm.’

Her voice was admirably steady now. ‘Are we trapped then?’

‘Not at all,’ he said cheerfully. ‘I read about these places somewhere. If this is an old lava tube, it might go on all the way to the sea. Perhaps it’ll be simpler to walk down the tunnel. Might even be safer than the forest in the dark. It obviously runs close to the surface, so there may be other roof falls. We might find a lower spot where we can climb out. If not, we’ll just have to come back here and try something else.’

She managed a smile. ‘You make it seem so easy.’

‘My motto: always try the easy way first.’

‘Well, let’s get started then.’ Mike thought she suddenly looked resolute but nervous.

‘It’s all right,’ he said, patting his gun. ‘I’m sure I can take care of any other spiders.’

‘No, it’s not that…it’s just that I’m slightly claustrophobic.’

She made a little gesture towards her missing arm. ‘I was trapped in our auto for nearly two hours when this happened, being squeezed against all the crushed metal…I’ve never liked close spaces since then.’

‘I’m sorry. We’ll try to climb out here then.’

‘And have you fall and break your neck on my account?

Certainly not, Sergeant Yates. We’ll try the tunnel…only, you won’t mind if I talk as we go, will you?’

He smiled. ‘Not at all.’

The view through the imaging coil from a thousand feet above the

summit of the volcano as dawn started to grey the limb of the ocean was probably quite spectacular. The Brigadier was not in sightseeing mood, however. All he wanted to see was some sign of his missing personnel. They thought they saw lights on the shore of the lagoon, but every time he tried to move the portal towards it an uncontrollable rocking and pitching motion set in, causing him hastily to reset for fear of losing the location altogether. Liz's note on her clipboard stared back at him: 'Spatial steering controls need adjustment.

Additional power may help.'

He had never really trusted complicated machinery.

'Sir,' said Benton. 'If we've got enough power now, I could go through after them.'

'We have just got the power, Benton, but no. Your offer is noted, but I can't risk losing my entire staff one by one at this moment. There has to be some better way we can get a message to them.'

If only he could think of it.

Right, Lethbridge-Stewart, face the facts.

You can only reliably make this thing go up and down.

You haven't the power reserve to engage in a full-scale search through all those trees, even if the bridge could be steered properly, until the replacement accumulators arrive. And by then there wouldn't be the time. But they could be anywhere down there by now. How to cover the ground? How to cover...?

'Benton!'

'Sir?'

'How many photocopiers in the building?'

'Uh...two, I think, sir.'

'Get them warmed up, and find as much paper as you can.'

Amelia did talk as they traversed the dark tunnel, occasionally crushing underfoot the remains of oversized insect carapaces, which must have been the giant spider's main foodstuff. But she kept her voice sensibly low, and fell silent the instant Mike stopped to listen for

any other signs of life or to check the way ahead, so he had no cause to complain. Besides, it was cheering to hear a human voice in such circumstances, and Amelia spoke intelligently and at times wittily. She seemed to be without bitterness for what had happened to her, generously ascribing her fortitude to her religious faith. But she was not oppressively pious either, for which Mike was grateful. He replied to her polite enquiries about himself with snippets about his family and army career, trying to avoid any details that would suggest he was not of this time. At first she spoke of general topics, but they gradually became more personal.

'The accident wasn't Pa's fault at all, but I know he still blames himself. It was an out-of-town road at night, you see, and he had to leave us both in the car to go for help. And while he was gone...my mother died...' There was an awkward silence, but before Mike could respond, Amelia said quickly:

'I'm not trying to win more sympathy, you know. I've had plenty of that. Nor am I complaining about what happened.

What's done is done. But I just want people to understand about Pa, and what *he* went through. I think it was worse for him, in a way. My injury is obvious, his is buried deep down.

He had to bring me up by himself, without a wife's help.' She smiled ruefully. 'Later there were boy problems, of course.'

'Problems?'

'I stepped out with a few apparently perfectly respectable young men, who didn't seem to mind about my arm. But after a while I began to wonder if they cared more about my inheritance. By that time my father had become quite wealthy, you see.'

'Don't you think some of them really were interested in you for yourself, and not the money?'

'Maybe, but I couldn't be sure. Selfishly, perhaps, I made it clear to them that they were two separate matters, which tended to sour things rather quickly. I also wondered if some boys were dating me out of sympathy, without feeling, or even for a sort of dare with their friends. Everything became terribly confusing. In self-defence I had to learn to read people's true intent. And then of course, not liking what I often found, I had to learn to be more forgiving of human frailties. When Pa met Nancy...But that's not for me to speak of.'

‘Well, I think any man who didn’t persist for the sake of your company didn’t deserve it in the first place, Miss Grover.’

She seemed genuinely surprised at his remark. ‘Why, thank you, Sergeant. You are very kind. You are also very easy to talk to. I don’t usually talk to strangers quite so freely, you know. It must be the surroundings.’

He smiled back, though it was probably lost in the gloom.

‘Yes, it’s probably that. But thank you anyway…’ He paused.

‘Hallo, what’s this?’

Ahead the tunnel was blocked by a pile of rock reaching up to the roof.

‘Oh, well,’ said Amelia. ‘That seems to be it.’

‘No, can you feel a slight breeze?’

‘Why…yes, I can.’

‘Then the air must be getting through somewhere. I wonder if we can see any light? Must be dawn soon. I’ll turn off the torch for a moment.’

He felt Amelia’s hand close on his in the darkness. ‘It won’t be for long,’ he said reassuringly. ‘Just until our eyes adjust.’

They waited for a minute. A faint greyness became visible, washing down from a narrow crack between the rubble and the tunnel roof. Mike cautiously clambered up the slope a few feet. Vines and bleached white root tendrils snaked down from above. Beyond them he could just make out a tangle of leaves.

‘This looks like it,’ he called down. ‘Bit of a tight squeeze, but we should be able to get through.’

‘Anything to get out of this place. Lead on!’

Within two minutes they were pushing their way out of a crevice half concealed under a thickly spreading bush that almost filled the hollow made by the tunnel roof collapse.

From the outside nobody would have guessed that such an entrance existed. They found themselves blinking in the pale pre-dawn grey of

morning, back amid the soaring trees of the forest. A refreshingly cool breeze was stirring the foliage briefly, before the heat and humidity of full morning set in.

Mike checked his compass against the bearing he had taken last night from the summit of the volcano. ‘Right, that way will take us most directly to the beach, I think. Then we head along it until we get to your yacht.’

‘The sooner the better,’ confirmed Amelia. ‘I’m longing for a hot bath and a change of clothes.’

They set off through the trees, Mike with his gun carried at the ready, alert should any more of Salutua’s giant fauna appear, but hoping they would not. They had only been walking for a couple of minutes, however, when he paused.

‘Can you hear that? A sort of steady clicking, rustling sound?’

‘Yes. Where’s it coming from?’

‘Right up ahead, I’m afraid. Keep behind me and try not to make any noise.’

He edged silently forward, Amelia shadowing him. The ground rose where one of the great trees threw out its massive buttress roots. The strange sound came from the other side: a loud, incessant patter, like falling rain. He crawled to the top and peered over. Beyond was an incredible sight. After a moment he waved Amelia up to join him, but signalling caution.

They looked down on one of the tiny valleys that meandered between the great trees, which might form a stream when the weather was wet. But now its dry bed made a road for a column of the giant ants Amelia had spoken of earlier. There were hundreds of workers, busily scurrying along with their forage, which was mainly leaves as large as parasols, odd fragments of shell with pink meat inside, and also dark furred and leathery flesh which he could not identify. Every so often they were passed by their unladen fellows, presumably returning from their nest for more. Every ten yards or so along the trail stood a warrior ant, distinguished by its massive mandibles, acting as sentinel in case anything disturbed the column. Mike recalled a nature film he had seen once where a miniature camera had shown just such a spectacle from the ant’s eye level. No need for special cameras here, he thought.

Then Amelia gasped and turned her head aside.

One ant was carrying the bloody but unmistakeable remains of a human forearm.

Mike supported Amelia as she staggered back down the slope, and held her as she was violently sick. He didn't blame her. He felt a little queasy himself. Were the ants scavenging from the fight he heard that night? And if the Doctor and Liz Shaw had been involved in it, where were they now?

When she was done, he gave her another drink from his canteen. Pale faced but determined, she faced him.

'I must get back to the *Constitution* right away...I must know what's happened...if Pa's okay...' He saw the depth of love in her eyes.

'I know. But we've got to cross the ant trail first, without starting a fight with those sentries. They look like vicious brutes. Let's see if there's an easier way. Come on.'

They scouted along the line of the ant trail for a few hundred yards until they came upon a fallen tree bridging over the column. 'Hold my hand,' he said. They edged across gingerly. Amelia's nails dug into his flesh. A warrior ant was standing alertly on a boulder only a few yards off. It turned its head to follow their progress, antennae twitching, but made no move towards them. Mike's finger never left the trigger all the time they were under its gaze. He was sure he could deal with any single ant, but the thought an army of them relentlessly pursuing him through the forest made him shiver.

Then they were over and hurrying on again. Another quarter of a mile and Mike heard the sound of waves breaking on a beach.

'Nearly there,' he said cheerfully. Amelia managed a tight smile. The giant trees were thinning and becoming less massive, but there was more undergrowth and the occasional stand of breadfruit trees. Then they saw the fringe of the coconut palms. Through them the sky shone vividly with the first true light of dawn.

Amelia stopped suddenly. 'What was that?'

There was a soft mechanical whirring noise coming from their left and a little behind them. Every so often there was a swish and crack, as though foliage had been brushed aside. It was getting louder.

‘I don’t know. Let’s get out of sight just in case.’

They crouched down behind a tree breathlessly. Mike peered round the trunk, gun at the ready.

A bush twenty yards away was flattened to the ground and an odd vehicle rolled into view. It had an undercarriage and caterpillar tracks like those of a small tank, but instead of a conventional body or gun turret, there were two low rectangular box-like units fore and aft with a dull grey globe, seven or eight feet across, set between them. Mounted on top of this was a small, twin-lensed camera turret that panned left and right across the vehicle’s path.

Mike pulled his head back into cover again and put his finger to his lips as a warning to Amelia. He was desperately curious about the tank, but he knew he couldn’t afford to get involved in another mystery at this moment. He hoped it would simply go on past and let them continue down to the beach.

Unfortunately it didn’t.

It stopped a few yards away on the other side of the tree.

There was a series of whirs and clicks. He snatched another glance around the tree. A mechanical arm had unfolded from the unit on the front of the tank, on the end of which was a small scoop. It began to dig up a sample of earth. Just go, please, Mike thought. The scoop snapped shut and withdrew, depositing the sample in some receptacle within the main unit.

The tank started moving again and Mike jerked his head back.

Good. But the tank simply drove right up to the other side of the tree and stopped again. There were more whirs and clicks, then a sudden harsh whine. The thing was drilling a sample out of the tree itself.

Amelia looked at him anxiously. He simply shrugged.

They had to wait.

The sound of the drill got louder. Suddenly the furiously rotating hollow tip burst through the bark inches from Amelia’s head. With a small cry of surprise she flinched away, overbalanced, and fell clear of the tree and into the tank’s field of vision.

The drill stopped even as Mike dived from the cover of the tree,

yanked Amelia to her feet and drew her back a few paces.

‘We’re going to back away from it slowly and steadily,’ he murmured. ‘Don’t run unless I tell you.’

The drill whirred and withdrew, folding away even as the tank manoeuvred around the tree and started forward, camera lenses swivelling about to track them. A different mechanical arm emerged from the unit with an ominous looking tube mounted on its end.

Mike pointed his machine-gun at the advancing vehicle.

‘You can see I’m armed,’ he shouted, ‘keep back!’ The tank kept on coming. He fired a short burst across the tank’s path, kicking up spouts of earth. The tank did not slow down.

‘Run!’ he shouted to Amelia as he fired at the camera mount, trying to smash the lenses. Bullets rebounded and whined away into the trees, but seemed to do no damage. The tube on the end of the mechanical arm puffed out a cloud of vapour. He dived to one side even as something snaked past his head. Amelia screamed. He twisted about to see her writhing on the ground with a spray of whiplike tendrils wrapped about her, linked to the machine by a thicker cable.

Slowly the tank began to reel her in. Mike drew his knife and hacked at the line, but it was some sort of thin tough wire, and would not cut. Amelia struggled, but could not break free of the enveloping tendrils. Inexorably the machine dragged her closer.

In desperation, Mike unclipped a grenade from his belt and pulled the pin. He tossed the grenade on to the unit carrying the mechanical arms, and threw himself protectively across Amelia.

The grenade detonated with a flash and a bang. Metal ground against metal and the cable attached to Amelia dropped loose.

Then came a second and quite unexpected explosion.

Ten

o tell me, Professor Sternberg,’ said the Doctor, sipping h

‘S is iced fruit juice, ‘how on earth did you find Salutua in the first place? After all, it is virtually invisible from outside, isn’t it?’

Liz allowed herself to relax with her own drink in the comfort of the

Constitution's saloon. She felt she deserved a bit of luxury after tramping through the forest for most of the night.

The search party had been heralded with cheers from the yacht when they first appeared. But the initial jubilation was soon dispelled by the news of their losses and their failure to find Amelia. Liz and the Doctor were introduced and accepted, without apparent suspicion, as members of a British expedition to the island. It was sometimes useful, Liz decided, to come from a nation noted for its eccentrics. The fact that the Doctor, for all his mannerisms, was not even human, let alone English, merely added an extra quirk to the situation.

Grover was greeted tearfully by an attractive young woman, introduced as his wife Nancy, who seemed desperately relieved that he had returned safely. An older woman, his secretary apparently, welcomed him with a less ostentatious display but equally obvious relief. Grover went into conference with Pascoe about a second sortie, saying he would talk to Liz and the Doctor again shortly, and left Montgomery to look after them. The actor had naturally led them straight to the saloon and the bar therein, where he began to produce drinks so efficiently that Liz almost forgave him for his earlier attentions.

Under their influence and in the morning light, the scenes she had witnessed only hours before already seemed like a dream. Her present surroundings were far more to her taste, and she felt that she could quite grow to like the accommodation offered onboard a millionaire's yacht. If it were not for the slope of the deck, you would hardly know anything was wrong. Except, of course, there was no mistaking the atmosphere of apprehension and despondency that had settled once more over the ship. Only Grover seemed to resist it. He believed passionately that Amelia was still in hiding somewhere, or had got lost after escaping from the giant crabs. Hope was all that was sustaining him now, Liz thought.

She snapped out of her reverie and tried to take in Sternberg's response to the Doctor's question. Of them all, Sternberg had shown most interest in their unexpected appearance on the island, and she could guess why. Still, he was polite and forthcoming enough, though a little distracted.

'Ach, Salutua. Yes, a place of legend indeed. I have worked for many years in the Pacific – mission hospitals and the like, you understand – and had heard stories of an island which had disappeared some fifty years before. According to legend, a fire giant from the volcano had

driven the indigenous population away. When they attempted to return they found the island had vanished. Naturally, I took little notice – there are so many such tales. Doubtless the volcano had actually destroyed the island, and the more fanciful story grew up afterwards. Or so I thought.

'Then, one day, not three months past, on an island perhaps a hundred and fifty miles from here, I was called upon in my medical capacity to treat a man the natives had found drifting in a small boat. He was a European, and suffering from exposure and the effects of injuries resembling animal bites and claw marks of a most unusual kind. Sadly he was beyond my help and he died shortly after without recovering consciousness. In searching his possessions for some indication of his family, if he had any, I came across a diary he had kept of his journey, together with precise navigational records. He too had listened to the legends, but he had followed them until he had penetrated the veil and found Salutua. Little details of his time on the island itself were recorded, as it seems he suffered his injuries quite soon after landing, but he had observations enough, together with samples of plants and insects, now sadly decomposing, to convince me of the remarkable nature of life here.

'Clearly there should be a proper expedition to the island, but I was in no position to finance such an undertaking: my work has been for charitable causes, you understand? But the name of Marshal Grover is well known in the region through his shipping company and other interests – now even the moving pictures. So I think: what a film might be made here!

And while this was done, I might make a scientific investigation of the island. So I made my way to San Francisco, where head office of shipping line is, and I persist until Mr Grover sees me, and I convince him. His lovely young wife, she will star in film, and it will make a holiday for his daughter...' Sternberg hung his head. 'But then the life here was far more vigorous and plentiful than I had expected.

And more dangerous, despite our precautions. Now the deaths of brave men and Grover's daughter missing...It was not meant to be like this, believe me.'

He pulled out his handkerchief and mopped his brow. His last words had been spoken with unusual passion, causing Liz to frown.

'Steady on, old chap,' said the Doctor. 'Nobody's blaming you for this.'

‘No, but I am responsible. It should have been a wonderful discovery, *my* discovery.’ He looked at them in sudden animosity and his tone hardened. ‘You understand? The reports in the scientific journals would have been under *my* name. But now you are here. I must know, when did you land? Are you working under French authority? Will you claim precedence for your expedition?’

‘Our department is supported by France, among others,’

Liz said carefully, ‘but we’re not going to make any prior claim. It’s clearly your discovery.’

‘But we would like to make our own study, if you don’t mind,’ the Doctor added. ‘Obviously there’s more work here than one man can cope with, wouldn’t you agree?’

Sternberg looked relieved. ‘Thank you. Yes, I am sure we can come to some agreement. As long as I may have the first choice over specimens and such items,’ he added quickly.

‘Of course,’ said the Doctor generously.

‘But we are forgetting the present circumstances. Miss Amelia is still missing. She must be found or else…’ He hesitated, then finished awkwardly: ‘…it will be a tragedy.

Grover may not wish to continue to support my researches, you see?’

‘Quite,’ agreed the Doctor. ‘That would be a tragedy.’

Sternberg stood up abruptly. ‘But now I must be about my work. There are specimens still to examine. I would join the search, believe me, but I would be more a liability to the rest.’

He laughed nervously. ‘Most likely I would shoot myself by accident.’

‘And that would never do,’ agreed the Doctor. ‘We quite understand.’

‘Thank you. Well, goodbye for the present, Doctor, Fraüline Shaw.’ He walked quickly out of the room.

Liz eyed Montgomery – who had fallen asleep in a chair on the other side of the room – for a moment, then said softly:

‘He wasn’t telling us the whole truth, was he?’

‘No, he wasn’t. But he was sincere about most of it, I think.’

‘Mmm…possibly. I thought you were very generous with your promises about the research.’

‘So were you about the precedence of his discovery.’

‘Well, I felt sorry for the man…Besides…’

‘Exactly. Let’s face it, Liz, we *know* nothing will ever come of it, don’t we? There is no record of any such discovery in the nineteen thirties. Something must prevent the facts about this place from ever becoming public.’ He rubbed his chin, a scowl creasing his face. ‘We may even have to do it ourselves.’

Liz felt unhappy at the idea. It didn’t feel right to consider suppressing knowledge. ‘Might we really?’

‘It’s possible, but I hope it doesn’t come to that. Let’s hope the decision is taken out of our hands –’

There was a shout from the deck: ‘I can hear shooting!’

Almost immediately came the distant echo of an explosion.

They sprang to the saloon windows. From over the trees about half a mile down the shore in the next bay along, a puff of smoke was rising into the lightening sky. They made a dash for the deck, where a reconnaissance party was already forming. She saw Dodgeson and de Veer awkwardly but resolutely carrying rifles. Grover turned to the Doctor.

‘Could that be to do with any of your people? We can account for all of our men.’

‘It’s…er, possible somebody has arrived early to see how we’re doing,’ he admitted, ‘but I really couldn’t say for sure from here. We’ll just have to go and take a look, won’t we?

Come on Liz.’

‘Miss Shaw should stay onboard,’ Grover said.

‘Thanks, but I’ll come anyway.’

‘It might be dangerous.’

‘What isn’t around here?’

They clattered down the accommodation ladder and on to the beach, golden in the first rays of the morning sun. There was a promontory of sand and a stand of palm trees at the end of the scalloped bay in which the *Constitution* lay, and towards this they made their way at a brisk pace. Liz saw Grover's stout figure out in the lead. She hoped he was not going to be disappointed by whatever they found. They reached the palms and plunged through them. On the other side Grover stopped dead. Two figures were staggering out of the trees halfway down the sweep of the beach: a man and a woman.

'Amy?' Grover called out hesitantly, then louder: 'Amy!'

The woman looked around dazedly, then waved. Grover began to run. The Doctor jogged along at Liz's side.

'Do you see who's with her?'

'It's...Sergeant Yates, isn't it?'

'Exactly. Now what's he doing here?'

'Looking for us, I would think. And it looks as if he's been having quite a time of it.'

'Yes, it does. Come on.'

By the time they reached Mike, Grover was hugging his daughter tightly to him. Both were crying in unashamed relief.

Mike, standing to one side and looking dazed and slightly dishevelled, greeted their appearance with an interesting mixture of relief and reproach.

'Ah, there you are Doctor, Miss Shaw. The Brigadier was getting anxious about you.'

'I thought he might,' remarked Liz dryly. 'We weren't expecting the...uh, "transportation difficulties" to be sorted out so soon, or else we would have been waiting for you, wouldn't we, Doctor?'

'Naturally.' The Doctor beamed disarmingly at Mike.

'Still, I'm glad to see you found us all right in the end. And Miss Grover too. Well done.'

'Thank you,' Mike replied tersely, 'it was nothing, really.

Just twenty foot deep pits, giant spiders, an ugly oversized and misplaced statue –'

'Misplaced in what way?' the Doctor cut in.

Mike sighed. 'It was in the pit, it was about eighteen feet tall, had one red eye and looked like nothing on Earth. Now where was I? Yes: scavenging ants and, to cap it all, some lunatic in a tank tried to grab us.'

'A tank?' exclaimed Liz. 'We saw tank tracks earlier.'

'Well the thing itself is about a hundred yards back in the trees there. What's left of it, anyway.'

'Was that the explosion we heard?' the Doctor asked, suddenly looking alert. 'You didn't damage it, did you?'

'It was him or us,' Mike protested. 'I tossed it a grenade.

Only trying to disable this device on the front that had got hold of Miss Grover. But the whole thing went up. Funny sort of bang it was. Sprayed a lot of water about and knocked us for six. My ears are still ringing.'

'Let's go and have a look at the remains, Liz,' the Doctor suggested. But he was interrupted.

'Just a minute, Doctor.' Grover spoke solemnly, voice still husky. He was standing with one arm wrapped about Amelia.

The other he thrust out towards Mike to shake. 'Amy's been telling me what this young man did for her, and I've got something to say.' He shook Mike's hand firmly. 'Sergeant, you don't know what you've done, bringing my girl back to me like this...I can't put it into words, so I just have to say...thank you. I will always be in your debt.'

'You're very kind, sir, but really, it was a privilege. You have a most charming and courageous daughter.'

Grover beamed down at Amelia. 'Don't I know it. And now she's going back to the ship to get cleaned up. I'm not going to risk anything else on this island taking her away again.'

Ferraro and three sailors stood ready, and Amelia, with a wave to Mike and her father, was escorted away along the beach to the yacht.

Grover turned back to the rest. Liz thought he looked ten years younger than he had an hour before.

'Now my mind's settled, I'm curious about this tank thing, Doctor, especially as it seems to have taken an uncommon liking to my daughter. Shall we take a look at it?'

Mike led the way, with the Doctor, Liz, Grover, de Veer and Dodgeson following on behind.

The remains were scattered about the undercarriage of the tank, which was still almost intact, but the units fore and aft were almost totally destroyed, and all that could be seen of the sphere were a few widespread shards. Liz swallowed and steeled herself. She noticed a few strips of pale jelly-like flesh amid the wreckage, and a peculiar musty, damp odour hung in the air. As she and the Doctor examined fragments, Mike described the vehicle and its actions. Dodgeson, who had been frowning, suddenly spoke up.

'Say, this thing sounds like the globe I saw as we came in through the reef, just before that blast tore out a hole in our hull.'

'Really,' said the Doctor, 'most interesting.' He was holding a piece of the globe. It was dull grey, and almost four inches thick.

'Armour plate?' asked Mike, with professional interest.

'Not exactly. A kind of ceramic. Immensely strong, but rather brittle. I'm afraid your grenade cracked it, and the internal pressure did the rest. It blew apart, and its driver with it.'

'But who would be travelling around inside such a contraption?' Grover asked.

'Well not a human, if that's what you mean. There's enough of the occupant left to indicate that.'

Grover gave him an incredulous look. 'Not *what*?'

'Some form of aquatic life, I should think, accustomed to high pressure. Remember, it came from the direction of the sea in the first place, and seemed to be heading back there when Mike, uh, stopped it.'

'You're telling me this tank was driven by a fish!'

The Doctor smiled tolerantly. ‘That’s a very simplistic description, but essentially correct.’

Grover shook his head. ‘Now I’ve heard everything!’

He seemed to feel the need to walk about for a minute, still shaking his head and kicking at the pieces of the tank.

Dodgeson and de Veer were also giving them odd looks, Liz noted. Mike took the opportunity to speak urgently in a low voice.

‘Right, you’ve had your fun, Doctor, Miss Shaw. But the Brigadier gave me strict orders to bring you back to the crater as soon as possible, where we will wait until the time bridge is powered up again –’

‘Oh, yes, how badly was it damaged?’ Liz interrupted quickly. ‘You obviously managed to get it fixed earlier than I thought.’

‘Something of a lash-up, apparently. Osgood saw to it. But now I must insist –’

‘Osgood!’ Liz and the Doctor looked dismayed.

‘Does it matter?’ asked Mike. ‘Now if we can be getting along –’

‘But we can’t just walk out now!’ exclaimed the Doctor.

‘We have a mystery to solve, you can see that.’

‘Maybe later, Doctor. But first you are both coming back with me so the Brigadier can see you’re safe and sound.’

‘You go and reassure the Brigadier by all means, Sergeant.

Just give us a couple of hours here undisturbed,’ the Doctor said artfully. ‘That can’t hurt, surely?’

‘What are you going to do if we disobey?’ Liz teased.

‘Take us back at the point of a gun?’

Mike fumed impotently.

Then de Veer said: ‘Hey, look at that – in the sky.’

They all looked up. A thin cloud of white specks was drifting and fluttering out of the air all over the island. There must have been

hundreds of them, but at first Liz could not judge their size until the first ones dropped among the trees.

Then she realized they were sheets of typing paper. One fluttered down to earth nearby, and Mike ran across to retrieve it. She saw his face set as he read it, and he brought it back to them without a word.

The photocopied message was inscribed in bold felt-tip letters:

ATTENTION: YATES, SHAW, DOCTOR:

TIME BRIDGE WILL BE OPERATIONAL FROM

APPROX 18.00 HRS. MAKE SMOKE SIGNAL IF NOT

ABLE TO RETURN TO CRATER AND WILL ATTEMPT

RENDEZVOUS. RECORDS SHOW VOLCANIC

ERUPTION AT YOUR COORDINATES ON 9 JUNE 1934

AT APPROX 22.00 HRS LOCAL TIME.

ISLAND *TOTALLY* DESTROYED!

LETHBRIDGE-STEWART.

Eleven

ancy was carefully combing out Amelia's damp hair, Nwhile Amelia, freshly bathed and robed, sat patiently before her cabin dressing table. Every so often she caught a curious glance from her in the mirror. It was not surprising.

Nancy had never done anything like this before and knew she was not doing it well now, but she had insisted, telling Maisie, Amelia's maid, that she would take care of Amelia for a while. She had read surprise in Maisie's eyes, but the girl had the sense to bob obediently and disappear. Nancy had to be alone with Amelia, to get it over with as soon as possible. A confession to expunge her guilt. And she'd never been very good at that.

'I'm...so glad you're all right...' she said awkwardly.

Damn, she was repeating herself, she must sound like an idiot.

'Thank you,' Amelia said simply.

Did Amelia recognize her guilt? Was she playing with her, drawing out the moment. No, that was not her way. She'd just be unbearably forgiving. Well, there was no turning back now.

'Last night...when those crab things attacked the ship, and you fell over the side...'

'Yes?'

'Well, I'm sorry...really sorry I didn't get to you in time.'

'What do you mean?'

'You know! When you were hanging on to the rail...I maybe could have made a grab for you a little faster, and, you know, pulled you back. Then all the rest wouldn't have happened. I'm *sorry*, all right!'

'What for?' Amelia seemed genuinely surprised. 'It all seemed to happen so quickly for me. I only held on to the rail for a second, then I fell into the water. I remember you shouting to make for the pontoon, but I was on the wrong side of the ship. And then the crabs were coming out of the water so fast, I never had a chance to get back on board.'

Nancy froze, comb in mid-stroke.

Amelia didn't realize she'd practically *let* her fall.

She'd confessed for nothing!

She felt dizzy and uncertain. Perhaps the guilt was all in her mind? Or was Amelia just saying it to make her feel better in her do-gooder way?

'Is this on the level?'

'Of course. But if you feel troubled, Nancy, I'm sure you shouldn't be. Even if you did hesitate for a moment, with all those terrible creatures around, who could blame you? It probably wouldn't have made any difference anyway, and you might have fallen in as well trying to pull me back. Please don't let it worry you.'

Nancy threw down the comb. 'Damn it, don't be so reasonable! Get angry! Say you hate me! Let's get it over with here and now!'

Amelia turned serious eyes upon her. 'I cannot be other than I am in this matter, Nancy. We've covered this ground before. I honestly do

not hold you responsible for what happened to me. It was no doubt intended somewhere that it should be so, and all we can do is try our best at such times. If you really believe you were guilty of some omission, then we might talk of repentance, but I don't think you want such advice.'

'You're damn right I don't!'

Nancy strode out of the cabin, slamming the door behind her.

She felt sick with impotent anger. Why couldn't Amelia simply have got mad at her? That would have balanced things up. But she could never touch Amelia, never get her under her thumb, or make her spoil her spotless image. And now Amelia had a lever on her. But hold on! Amelia would never use it, that wasn't her style – except maybe to save her father from hurt. Yes, then she might. Nancy realized she'd have to be even more careful about her discreet flirtations in future. If Amelia ever found out she was two-timing Grover she'd let it all out, and then she'd lose everything.

A part of her began to wish that Amelia had died in the forest. Then nobody would ever have known. It would have been so much simpler.

'That's the last of them, sir,' said Benton, tossing a handful of photocopied warnings through the portal and out into the air over the island.

'Good.' The Brigadier reset the controls so that the portal dropped back to the crater floor, then gratefully slid the power lever back to five percent. He'd been running the levels up and down in time with Benton throwing the next bundle of paper so as to eke out their meagre reserves. A couple of times, before they'd become synchronized, the papers had simply fallen through the coil on to the floor the other side.

Once only half the bundle had gone through, while the rest fluttered to the floor of the lab looking as though it had been cut across with a guillotine. He shuddered to think what would happen to a person in those circumstances. It made the necessity of achieving full power before he dared let anyone else through all the more apparent.

'How are the levels, Osgood?'

'Uh...Just enough to keep it ticking over, sir.'

'Right, we'll hold it there on low power, where we can keep a watch

on the volcano. Nothing else we can do now until the replacement accumulators arrive. When are they due?'

'Er, about another five hours or so, sir. Wiring in won't take long, but they'll still need charging.'

'But will it be operational by eighteen hundred?'

'Just about, sir.'

'Good. Until then, you and your team had better get some rest.' He looked at the bright morning sun illuminating the tall windows of the laboratory, and realized how tired he felt.

'You'd better work out a roster, Benton. Brief some of the other men on keeping a watch on this thing, then get some rest yourself. We must be fresh for this evening.'

'But they will get the message, won't they, sir?' Benton asked anxiously. 'They should just be standing by ready to be picked up.'

'I hope so, Benton. But we'll be prepared just in case they aren't.'

Corporal Bell from the communications room entered.

'The film from New York has just come over the satellite relay, sir, and I've got the video copy ready. And reports of some new incidents are coming in.'

'Anything else from Canberra?'

'Nothing more, sir.'

The Brigadier sighed. 'Very well, I might as well see the film. Not my idea of early morning viewing, though.'

Grover waved one of the message sheets in front of the Doctor.

'Just what is this, Doctor? What kind of stunt are you trying to pull, here?'

They were all back in the *Constitution*'s saloon. Amelia and Nancy were now sitting on the chesterfield on either side of Grover, though Liz sensed some tension between them.

Sternberg had re-emerged on hearing of the shower of warning messages and added his intent gaze to the rest. For the first time Liz

felt that the three of them were under less than friendly scrutiny.

‘It means just what it says,’ the Doctor replied gravely.

‘This island is going to be destroyed at ten o’clock tonight by the volcano.’

‘Well I know something of volcanos,’ Grover came back at him. ‘There are plenty of them round the Pacific, and I’ve seen a few blow their tops. And usually there are signs a few hours before that the natives watch for: earth tremors, odd noises, changes in the weather, gases venting faster or sometimes shutting off entirely. And I don’t see any of that here.’

‘Normally I’d agree with you, Mr Grover,’ said Liz patiently. ‘But I’m sure our information is good. You must believe the warning.’

‘That’s another thing, young lady. Where did this so-called warning come from? It was like it was - dropped from a balloon or plane or somesuch, but I didn’t see hide nor hair of one. And while we’re on it, who in tarnation is this

“Lethbridge-Stewart”, and what is a “time bridge”?’

The Doctor looked at Liz and then Mike, who shrugged, as much as to say: this is your field, you explain it.

‘It may be hard for you to accept, but we are all travellers in time,’ the Doctor began. ‘From almost forty years in the future, actually. We represent an international organization called UNIT, commanded by a Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart.

We travelled back here through time and space via a device called a “time bridge” to carry out a scientific investigation of the origin of an artifact we found in the future and traced back to this island...’ He trailed off as he saw the ring of disbelieving faces around him. ‘Part of an alien spacecraft, as it turned out,’ he added helpfully. The silence grew deeper.

‘No, well I didn’t think you’d accept it quite as readily as all that. But nevertheless, it happens to be true.’

De Veer chuckled. ‘Say, Mr Grover, we should get them writing for Paragon. A crazy story like that might do well.’

Mike spoke up crisply. ‘Mr Grover. You said earlier you were in my

debt for saving your daughter. Then, for the sake of that debt, and your daughter's life, please believe what we say and get away from this island as soon as possible.'

Liz was impressed. There was a quiet dignity about the young sergeant's manner that carried conviction. She began to take more of a liking to him.

Grover wavered. 'And I still stand by it, son. But this has got me confused. What you did doesn't mean you're not in on some kind of set-up. Maybe saving Amelia fitted in very well with your plans. You think you can make something of this place for yourselves, and you want us away from here. So you cook up a scheme to scare us off.'

The Doctor snorted. 'Really! What a preposterous notion.

If I wished to frighten you away, I'd concoct a far more convincing story than this.'

'So I'm supposed to believe any wild story I'm told, just *because* it's crazy?'

'Quite so,' interjected Sternberg. 'They want to keep the discoveries here for themselves. Well I will not leave until I have discovered the specific cause of the mutations on this island, do you hear?'

'I'm very much afraid that won't be possible,' said the Doctor. 'Even if it weren't for the volcano, I rather suspect the mutations are caused by some extra-terrestrial agency, which in all probability is quite beyond your resources to comprehend or analyse.'

'Hah! You insult my intelligence *and* abilities, now.'

'Not at all. I'm just warning you that you're dealing with a situation beyond your understanding.'

'Well if so, I will *make* them understandable and turn them to my purpose. That is what science is about!'

'And exactly what purpose would that be, Professor?' Liz asked curiously.

Sternberg faltered. Grover said: 'Enough of this. Give me proof. Show me this "time bridge" of yours.'

'Ah...Well it's not working very reliably at present as the message

says,' the Doctor admitted. 'You'll have to wait till six o'clock at least.'

'And by then it might be too late!' Liz put in. 'Sorry, you've got to do better than that.'

The Doctor fished in his pockets and brought out his sonic screwdriver. 'You saw this work on the crabs and bats.

Examine it. You can tell this is an unusually advanced device not of your time.'

'A clever gadget,' Grover said dismissively. 'I don't doubt your intelligence, Doctor. But tinkering that up means nothing.'

'What about the sea tank?' suggested Mike.

'They're peculiar, I grant you, but what do they prove? I've only your word those remains inside it were of some kind of intelligent fish. And that's still nothing to do with the volcano.'

'Well, there is the spacecraft in the crater,' pointed out Liz.

'Though of course it might not be a good idea to go up there if there's going to be an eruption,' she finished reflectively.

'There's something nearer than that, Liz,' the Doctor said suddenly. 'Something your daughter can already vouch for, Mr Grover.' Amelia looked at him curiously.

'What?'

'The so-called statue in the pit she fell into.'

'What's that got to do with anything?' asked Mike in surprise.

'You did say it looked like nothing on Earth,' the Doctor reminded him. 'I believe that may be literally true. I think it's the body of the pilot of that spacecraft in the crater.'

'But it's huge!' Mike protested.

'Life comes in many forms and sizes in the universe, you know. In fact, Professor Sternberg was telling us a legend about a giant earlier.' Sternberg blinked in surprise. The Doctor turned to Grover. 'How about a little expedition, assuming Sergeant Yates can find his way back to the pit, to view the remains of an alien life form? Isn't it worth an hour of your time to find out for certain whether we're telling the

truth or not, bearing in mind the consequences if we are?'

Grover thought for a long moment, then nodded. 'Okay, Doctor, you're on.'

The camera work was shaky and clearly amateur, but the Brigadier found it more interesting than he expected.

After some initial jerky moments and some hasty focusing, a globular vessel appeared in the centre of the screen, drifting across the sky beyond some rooftops and a cluster of television aerials. This gave the image a sense of scale, suggesting the globe was at least a hundred feet across.

Suddenly it darted across the sky, momentarily catching the cameraman unawares. The screen blurred as he tried to catch up with it. He did so just in time to see a lance of blue fire stab down at the ground. There was a flash of an explosion. Then the craft shimmered and vanished into thin air. Later investigation revealed that the spectacular beam of energy had made no mark on the ground that anybody could discover.

There were excerpts from more incidents like that, together with several still pictures and many unimpeachable eyewitness reports. The news services were, understandably, having a field day. Globes had been seen across most of the American West Coast, it seemed, together with occasional sightings of smaller winged craft that outperformed any known make of jet. The data accompanying the film also included reports from military and civilian air-traffic controllers about intermittent images on their radar screens.

Such highly trained people did not usually come forward about unusual sightings, he knew full well. Quite the reverse, normally.

But in one respect every observation was the same.

Whatever the object was, it faded into thin air after only a few minutes of visibility. Some reports even spoke of objects remaining like glassy ghosts the whole time.

The Brigadier hunched over his desk, drinking his coffee in a distracted manner. Clearly this was more than the usual hoaxes, weather balloons or marsh gas incidents. Something undeniably peculiar was going on.

Under Ferraro's direction, a working party cleared the treacherous

covering of dead branches from the pit, letting daylight pour in. Through the enlarged aperture they could now see the statue from above. With its arms upraised, it almost seemed to be beckoning to them.

Liz grimaced at its parody of a face and said to Mike: 'I don't blame you for getting a fright when you saw it first.'

'Believe me, I would have jumped twice as high if I'd known it was a corpse. Assuming it turns out to be what the Doc says.'

'I'm sure it is. Nobody would deliberately make anything that grotesque.'

'All in the eye of the beholder,' the Doctor murmured.

Beside them, an enthusiastic Dodgeson started taking pictures. Grover stood looking on thoughtfully, with his wife close at his side. Liz wasn't sure why she had come along, since it was obvious she didn't like the forest. She did seem to be making a show of being close and affectionate to her husband, which clearly pleased him. Amelia Grover caught her eye and walked over, smiling apologetically. 'I'm sorry your word is being put to the test like this. But you understand my father's reasons.'

'But do you believe us?' the Doctor said intently.

Amelia glanced at Mike Yates for a moment, then said decisively: 'Yes, I think I do.'

'Then please speak to your father, if he should need more convincing. Now you know of the impending eruption, you would be foolish not to leave as soon as possible.'

'The repairs on the hull won't be finished for a few hours yet, but then I'm sure we'll go. After the deaths of those brave men who went out after me, I certainly don't want to stay longer than I have to.'

The sailors finished securing lines about the bole of the dead tree that lay across the lip of the pit and suspended a sturdy wooden runged rope ladder from them. Ferraro climbed down first with a lantern, then one by one the rest of the party followed.

Grover stood back from the huge figure, Nancy holding tightly to one arm, frowning. Sternberg curiously touched one of its legs, then took a penknife from his pocket and began to scrape at the surface, clearing

away the years of grime and dust. Dodgeson began to set up a camera tripod and flash unit.

De Veer said: 'Well, it's impressive in a kind of hideous way, I give you that. Maybe, if we go on with the film, we can work it into the story.'

'That might be in very bad taste,' said the Doctor scathingly. 'Examine it closely, man. You can see it's no statue.'

At his urging, they all gingerly began to prod and scrape at the accessible parts of the figure. Liz noticed small details on its surface that suggested seams and joints. Gradually she realized what she was looking at.

'It's wearing some kind of protective suit and helmet, isn't it?'

'Yes,' agreed the Doctor. 'I think the environment of Earth was quite hostile to it.'

'But what about those rods that run up its legs inside the suit?' asked Mike.

'A powered exo-skeleton for support in our gravity. From its size, I should say it evolved on a smaller world than ours.

Probably hotter too. Remember the dark hull of the spacecraft, Liz, and the way it absorbed energy?'

'Yes.'

'Well, this suit worked in the same fashion, most likely, absorbing whatever ambient heat it could, to supplement its internal heaters.' He tipped his head back and examined the thing's single eye again. 'From the look of that crystal, I should say this was a flurosilicone life form. More like stone than flesh and blood in these conditions. That sort of body chemistry needs temperatures of several hundred degrees to function properly in.'

Grover said impatiently: 'Well, Professor, what do you make of it?'

Sternberg broke off his examination to mop his brow. 'I am forced to admit it is like nothing I have ever seen. It is certainly no statue. Whatever this material is made of I cannot cut into it and hardly even scratch it, yet it is undeniably pliant to some degree. Fantastic as it seems, it may be what they say.

But I must get to the creature inside to be sure. But how to open this thing? I see no buckles or zips...' He trailed off, muttering to himself.

Surprisingly, Nancy Grover spoke up. 'Well I *know* it's not from around here. Just looking at it's enough to tell that. And that eye...It feels creepy. Can we get back to the yacht soon, please, Marshal?'

'Just a minute, Honey,' Grover assured her. He turned to the Doctor. 'All right. Say I believe this is some kind of man from Mars. And maybe you are from the future. Okay, we'll go out a little way in the yacht when she's fixed. But if that volcano doesn't blow on time, you're going to have some more explaining to do.'

'That is a very sensible decision,' said the Doctor.

'But why did this...creature come to Salutua in the first place? And how did it get down here?' Amelia asked practically.

'The spacecraft in the volcano was damaged, so we think it landed for repairs,' Liz explained.

The Doctor had been walking about the huge figure examining it intently. Suddenly he said: 'Can I have some more light on this side? Thank you.' The others followed him round and he pointed to the smooth bulge on its back. 'Yes, there, on its life-support pack. Do you see the scratches and dents? I think it simply fell through the roof. The tree probably came down later and helped cover the hole.'

'But why didn't it climb out?' Mike wondered.

'Its size would not make it very agile, especially on what is, to it, a high gravity world. Besides, I don't think it had time. If its heating unit was damaged, it probably froze before it could do anything about it.'

'Froze?' exclaimed de Veer.

'To its kind, the tropics are colder, relatively speaking, than Antarctica in mid-winter would be to you.'

Amelia shivered unconsciously. 'How terrible.'

'Yes,' Liz agreed. 'I just wonder why it travelled so far from its ship if the environment was so hostile?'

'It must have had a good reason,' the Doctor agreed.

‘Whatever it was, I think it had something to do with the cause of the anomalous growth on the island. It would be most unlikely that the two events were not connected in some way.’

Sternberg had been peering upward intently. ‘Look, there.

That larger bulge at its waist. It is a separate container of some kind?’

‘I believe it is, Professor. Sergeant, give me a leg up, will you, and I’ll take a look.’

Mike boosted the Doctor up high enough to reach the object in question. The Doctor scraped away at the encrusted dirt, revealing a flap closure. After some fumbling it sprang open. The Doctor reached inside and carefully drew out a rectangular box. Mike lowered him down again and everybody peered at the new find.

The box was silvery white, about a foot long by six inches high and four deep. There was a deep indentation on one side, the equivalent of a thumbnail slot on the human scale, Liz realized. The Doctor dug his fingers in and pulled. The lid and part of one side smoothly opened. Inside were three recessed padded compartments. One space was empty. Nestling in the other two were fist sized cubical containers, made out of what looked like tinted glass. One held a cylindrical bubble of amber fluid within it, the other a far smaller spherical bubble of red fluid. Fine spidery writing, a little like a cuneiform script, covered one face of each container, as though it had been etched into the glass.

The Doctor’s face lit up in sudden understanding. ‘Ah, Semquess drug ampules. That explains it.’

‘Sem who?’ asked Mike.

‘ *Semquess*. Some of the most skilled bio-engineers in the galaxy. Their genetic drugs could very well have caused the gigantism here.’

‘It looks as though there’s one ampule missing,’ Liz pointed out. ‘You don’t suppose it got broken, maybe when this Semquess fell down here.’

‘Perhaps, Liz, though the container looks undamaged, and these ampules are quite tough. But this creature wasn’t a Semquess. Definitely not.’

‘Then what was he doing with their drug ampules?’

‘I’m not sure. The Semquess are, I’m afraid, a rather venal race. They’ll make anything for sufficient payment.’ He held one ampule up to the light. ‘I don’t know what these remaining ampules contain. The lettering is only a form of code identification. Possibly they are different versions of the growth stimulator, possibly something else. They may be no longer active after all this time, but I can’t take a chance on it.

They must be destroyed as soon as possible.’

‘I’m sorry, Doctor,’ said Grover heavily, ‘but I can’t let you do that.’

Liz looked up in astonishment. A ring of sailors surrounded them, each with his rifle raised.

Twelve

he tableau in the pit held for several seconds.

T A shaft of sunlight striking through the hole in the roof illuminated them all starkly, while reflections splashed up the arching walls about them and twinkled in the single red eye of the frozen giant at their backs.

Nancy stood behind the threatening ring of sailors, next to Amelia, de Veer and Dodgeson – all for a moment united by variations of shock and surprise writ large on their faces. At the sailors’ shoulders were Grover and Sternberg, watching the three strangers intently. Grover looked sad but resolute, Sternberg eager and impatient. Nancy saw Yates start to reach for the machine-gun still slung over his shoulder.

‘Please don’t make me order them to fire,’ Grover said sharply. ‘I’d hate to harm any of you, really. Not after what you’ve done for us. But if I order it, they will. They’re a loyal crew.’ Mike sensibly put his hands up. ‘Take the sergeant’s gun, boys, and his pack and knife. And that sound gadget of the Doctor’s.’

‘Pa!’ Amelia said in disbelief. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Quiet, Amy…please.’

As the sailors set about disarming them, the Doctor recovered the use of his tongue. ‘You have an odd way of expressing your gratitude, Mr Grover.’

‘I’ll explain in a minute, Doctor. First, hand that box of ampules over

to the Professor. Please don't try any tricks.'

Sternberg took the container with all the tenderness of a mother holding a newborn baby. His expression, Nancy thought, was little short of rapturous.

'Professor,' the Doctor said sternly. 'I strongly advise you not to meddle with those drugs. They may have properties far beyond anything you could imagine.'

Sternberg looked at him with contempt. 'You cannot frighten me now, Doctor. But never fear, I will take care. I will learn their secrets. This is what I came to Salutua to find, though I never dreamt it would be in such a manner. This will be the turning point of my life!' A fanatical gleam came to his eyes. 'They hounded me out for one little mistake! Now I'll show them!' The sudden passion boiling out of the little man was almost tangible.

'Okay, Professor,' Grover said firmly, calming the excited scientist. 'You take the ampules back to the yacht and get started. Ferraro, go with him, please.'

There was a moment's silence while the Professor and escort left. Amelia placed herself before her father, her face set.

'Pa, what are you doing, how can you treat these people like this? What's it all about?'

Grover looked at her tenderly, clasping her hand. 'It's all about you, Amy. I'm doing this all for you.'

'What?' She looked stunned. Nancy gaped at him in surprise.

'It's very simple,' Grover continued. 'When Sternberg told me about this place and why he wanted to come here, it wasn't simply for some ivory tower high-minded research.

No, he had a particular idea in mind. He knew about you from the story the papers ran about the special clinic for amputees I gave to Mercy Hospital, remember? And that gave him an idea that sounded pretty far fetched, in fact practically crazy, but one he knew I'd have to go for. And I did. I *couldn't* pass up the chance, even though it was a long shot. You see, if he could find out what made everything grow so much here, he said he might be able to extract it, and use a little' – Nancy could hear he was choking up – 'to make your arm to grow back again!'

Amelia was astounded, blinking incredulously at her father.

The words now tumbled out of Grover.

'I wanted to tell you the truth, Amy, but I dared not get your hopes up just in case it all fell through. But you had to come along on the trip, in case whatever Sternberg found wouldn't keep till we got back home. So I made it seem like the filming was the big thing we were trying to keep secret, and got by with taking the smallest crew we could to make it seem convincing...'

His words seemed to fade into a roaring mist around Nancy. She swayed, close to fainting. For Amelia! He'd done it all for Amelia! Something snapped inside her.

'What the hell is all this!'

Her shrill scream of jealous rage cut Grover short and echoed round the pit. All eyes turned to her. At her side, de Veer, who could hardly have cared less for her now, recognized the signs and automatically hissed: 'Nancy –

don't!'

But it was too late. A part of her knew she had lost her temper and that she might say something foolish, but that part was not in control of her tongue. When, infrequently, her cold self-calculation left her, it revealed the angry insecurity that always simmered underneath, ready to strike out carelessly.

'This was for *her*?' She sneered incredulously. 'This miserable boat trip, my film, all for her? That's why you wanted to stay on here so bad! Didn't matter about me, that I might have got killed by that snake or the crabs, oh no! You lied about everything!'

Grover, looking distraught, was flapping his hands in feeble placation. 'No, Nancy. The film was genuine, I swear it. You can still make it if you want. I was just trying to please both the girls I love at the same time, you see?'

'You don't love me! It's always been her, not me. I'm your wife, ain't I? You know, I almost started missing you the other night when you were lost out there, and I never felt that way about anyone before. But I should have known better. It was always her first. Why do you waste your time on a stuck-up bible-spouting cripple like that I don't know...'

She bit back her next words, regaining her self-control, horrified at what she had said.

But, once again, it was too late.

She saw the dawning realization in all their eyes, even the three strangers: embarrassment, possibly a little sympathy.

Because, for her, it was over. They knew it and so did she.

She turned desperately back to Grover. 'I'm sorry, Marshal...I didn't mean...'

It was useless.

His face was a mask. Only his eyes spoke of the terrible hurt she had just dealt him. She could have stabbed him through the heart and induced no greater pain. In a sense, that was what she had just done, of course.

'Go back to the yacht, Nancy. Find another cabin. Stay out of my sight.' His words fell like lead slabs. 'Cooper,' he said to one of the sailors, 'go with her.'

She turned numbly and climbed the ladder out of the pit.

Her last glance at the group below gave her a cold crumb of satisfaction. Amelia was sobbing in her father's arms.

Crying for herself for the first time, Nancy thought. So, she had finally got to the girl. Unfortunately, it had just cost her a marriage and a career to do it.

Still yawning prodigiously, Benton helped guide the lorry into the UNIT car park.

'You been up all night as well, mate?' asked the driver as he jumped down from his cab. 'You should try a night run from Glasgow. Rush orders!' He looked around curiously.

'What you want these things here for anyway? Thought this was some kind of civil service office.'

'That's right, it is,' said Benton. 'We want them to power a new kind of electric tea trolley. Top secret, of course.'

'Only asked,' said the driver, sniffily.

Leaving Osgood's team to supervise the unloading of the accumulators into the service lift, Benton went back upstairs to the Brigadier's office to let him know the equipment had arrived. As he was passing the communications room, he ran into Bell who was just emerging with a new sheaf of papers.

'Going to see the old man, Sarge? These have just come through for him.'

'From Canberra?'

'No, the U.S. Things are getting pretty peculiar over there.

And it's spreading.'

'What is?'

Bell grinned. 'That's what they want *us* to tell *them*.'

It was a spacious cabin, with a separate lounge, bedroom and bathroom *en suite*. It also had a guard on the other side of its locked door.

'Well, there are worse places to be shut up in, I suppose,'

said Mike Yates philosophically. He prodded a chaise longue to test its softness, sat down and began unlacing his boots.

'Are you actually going to go to sleep at a time like this?'

Liz asked.

'Might as well, Miss Shaw. Unless you two have a better idea. You learn that in the army. Never miss a chance to catch up on sleep, or get in a little extra under your belt. So you can be a hundred percent awake later when you need to be.'

'Oh, very philosophical.'

'But eminently practical,' the Doctor admitted, settling himself back in a deep armchair. 'Why don't you pop into the bedroom, Liz, and get a few hours' rest yourself. You were up all night, remember.'

'So were you, and the night before.'

'An hour in this chair will be all I need, thank you. Why don't we talk in a little while, when we're all refreshed?' He closed his eyes.

‘But shouldn’t we be trying to escape, or something?’

The Doctor sighed, and opened his eyes again. ‘My dear Liz, this is not like you,’ he admonished gently. ‘You are usually much more analytical about things.’

‘Well perhaps I have an aversion to being locked up in a ship aground on an island that’s going to be blown up by a volcano in a few hours’ time. Anyway, isn’t escaping the sort of *Boy’s Own* thing you do in circumstances like this?’

‘Only when it’s appropriate. For example, where would you suggest we escape to, at present?’

Liz pondered. ‘Uh, I see what you mean.’

‘Exactly. The time bridge won’t be operational for a few hours yet, and there is no advantage in running around the forest pointlessly, being hunted by Grover’s men. Besides, Grover promised he would let us go when they were ready to depart, and I’ve no doubt he’ll keep his word. He just doesn’t want to risk us taking those ampules back before he leaves.’

He mused for a moment. ‘Poor chap. He’s been hurt enough already, and I’m afraid he will be again.’

Liz and Mike both nodded in sympathy. ‘You can’t blame him for trying to help Amelia, can you?’ said Mike. ‘She’s such a splendid girl.’

‘Precisely,’ the Doctor agreed. ‘And another reason why we don’t want to make any foolish move just at the moment.

It might delay the completion of the repairs to the hull.’ He nodded towards the portholes, through which the sounds of hammering could still be heard. ‘Now that the Brigadier’s ingenious message has let the cat out of the bag, it seems best that these people get off the island safely.’ His face darkened.

‘I only hope this was what was meant to happen.’

Mike was looking bewildered, but Liz nodded in understanding.

‘You mean if they all died here, that would explain why we never heard about the discovery of the ampules in the nineteen thirties. Assuming they are still active and have useful properties, of course.’

‘If they are still active they will certainly have startling properties,’ the Doctor said with feeling. Then he smiled slightly. ‘But let’s not get despondent. Hopefully Sternberg will never have a chance to find out one way or the other. I think you can afford to relax for a couple of hours at last, Liz.

There’s still time to sort this matter out without additional drama.’

‘Why? How can you be sure Sternberg isn’t testing the contents of those ampules right now?’

‘Because I rather think he will have to overcome a more fundamental problem first. If an ampule was broken here by accident then it must have been very bad luck indeed. I said they were tough. Well, they’re also very hard to open, unless you know how...’

The cabin was packed with a very comprehensive collection of scientific equipment. Grover had provided everything Sternberg had asked for. A few jars now contained specimens of dissected ant, crab and snake. Test tubes were tinted with reagents where he had begun his analysis of extracts from various organs. But most of the equipment was as yet unused, waiting to serve, to justify its existence. Rather like he had been for all these years. Or more accurately, to re-justify his existence.

The image came to him again of the sombre wood-panelled room where the court had sat. He could still recall the way the sunlight had fallen through the tall windows. Strange that it should have been such a bright day. He had been cleared of outright malpractice, but damned nevertheless by the verdict of misjudgement. Who would trust him now? And the family of the unfortunate young girl who died under his care had influence. They made sure he never worked in Switzerland again. Austria, Germany and France were also rapidly closed against him. So he fled to where nobody would care, as long as he had a useful skill. He was reduced to humble medical practice in the mission hospitals. What a fall from the heights he had once attained.

But now he had a second chance. He turned over the strangely formed ampules in his hands again and dreamt on.

Surely the substances within them could be turned to initiating regeneration instead of hypertrophism? Essentially the same parts of the cells must be stimulated in each case.

The protein component, no doubt. Or perhaps it was through the thyroid...or the pituitary...? Never mind, he would find out.

He already knew it worked and was not harmful to the creatures it altered. They were obviously healthy and vigorous. Frighteningly so! And now, by an incredible stroke of luck he had both samples and the original serum. Or something associated with it, anyway. His tests would soon determine just what it did. He would isolate the essence of the drug, the vital principle that initiated such dramatic change.

Then he was sure, he was *certain*, he could turn it to his purposes.

If only he could get one of the cursed ampules open!

It was ludicrous!

He could see a line in the glass which had to mark the junction between lid and bottle. There were slight depressions in it that suggested finger holds. But however he twisted, left or right, or pulled or pressed in different combinations, he could not remove the lid.

In frustrated rage he threw an ampule down on the deck. It bounced. How was he to open it, short of a sledgehammer?

And how would he preserve the contents in any sort of pure state then?

Lethbridge-Stewart scanned the latest reports with a deepening sense of unease. The rash of UFO sightings had not blown over like they usually did. They were spreading, and details of new incidents were coming in all the time, even though it was still night over most of America. It could not simply be due to media-induced mass hysteria. And now, bizarrely, it seemed to have entered the realm of the spiritualistic as well.

'What are we to make of this, Benton?' he asked, tapping a particular report. 'After seeing one of these flying saucers, a man in Sacramento, California, swears he saw the ghost of his brother, who had been dead for ten years, walking about his house. But oddly, his brother also seems to have aged appropriately in those ten years, and is now wearing some type of unidentifiable uniform to boot. Then there's the man in Santa Monica who was visited by his first wife, deceased, while enjoying an...er, intimate moment with his second wife.

Both testify to the apparition and are supported by witnesses.'

'A touch of the *Blithe Spirits*, sir,' commented Benton, straight faced.

'Perhaps, but this was not a Noël Coward revival. And, after visions of

people who did not exist, comes the reverse. A man collapsed from a heart attack in a restaurant in Portland, Oregon, while more of these delta-shaped UFOs were supposedly overhead. But nobody, diners or staff, seemed to notice him sprawled across the table for almost an hour, until a waiter tried to seat a new customer in the same chair. When the ambulance people arrived, they reported "difficulty in seeing the corpse". It was taken for a post mortem, where it was apparently lost completely. And there are dozens more like this, plus a few from the Central States and the East Coast now as well. It's spreading, whatever it is, but what do we make of it? Flying saucers I may give the benefit of the doubt to, ever since the Autons made their invasion attempt with those fake meteorites. But ghosts and reincarnation, even if apparently associated with UFO sightings, are not on UNIT's remit.'

There was a pause, and Benton felt he should say something. 'I had an aunt who read tea leaves and always reckoned herself a bit of a medium, sir, and...'

'Well?'

'Well...she was a nice old dear apart from that...Made a very good cherry cake,' he finished lamely.

'Perhaps,' said the Brigadier heavily, 'she can lend us a hand until the Doctor and Miss Shaw return.'

'Shouldn't think so, sir. She died five years ago.'

'In the present circumstances, Benton, I don't think that will be a particular handicap.'

There had been a few hours of numbness for Nancy, mainly taken up with the mechanical business of moving her possessions into a spare cabin, but it had passed. Gradually she recovered from the shock of what she had done, and then coldly set about the business of salvaging what she could from the remains.

She'd done it before, when she was still fighting her way out of what passed for her childhood. The details would have shocked her many fans. Of course now she would probably lose them as well, she reminded herself. Her career at Paragon was finished, Grover and de Veer would see to that. Whether she could ever act in films again anywhere was doubtful. That left money. Ultimately, it was all you could trust. But would Grover even leave her with her jewellery after what she had said? And if she disputed anything and it went to court,

how would her past, and her present for that matter, compare with his? What sort of settlement could she expect if those affairs, which she had carelessly failed to terminate even after her marriage, came to light? A token dollar? She had to grab everything she could while she had the chance.

And there was something she had seen which might give her that security, but she needed help to get it.

There was only one person on board the ship now that she could possibly rely on. But she would have to work fast before he heard too much of the story of what she had said in the pit.

So she sent Tilly to Ferraro, who was on the beach again checking the repaired hull, asking him to come to her cabin on a matter of great importance. She then rapidly changed into a light, clinging dress, and liberally applied her best perfume.

He arrived fifteen minutes later, standing uncertainly in the doorway as though he was not sure if he should enter, holding his cap in his hand and awkwardly twisting it by the brim.

Once again she was struck by the unusual image of the tough, capable, rather hard man, who was almost reduced to the level of a nervous adolescent in her presence. It gave her a delicious sense of power.

'You wanted to see me, Mrs Grover?'

From his unhappy tone, she knew he had heard what she had done. Methodically she set about adjusting his appreciation of events to suit her needs, letting that hint of a gracious southern accent slip into her voice, recalling the long suffering plantation owner's wife she had played so successfully in *The Carolina Belle*.

'Why, Mr Ferraro, thank you for coming.' She let her voice falter. 'I have been terribly misunderstood, and I wouldn't want you, of all people, to think ill of me. Not after your kindness, and the heroic way you saved me from that awful snake. Please come in, and do close the door.'

'I must apologize for the way Pa is treating you,' said Amelia Grover sincerely. 'Please be patient with him. He doesn't do this sort of thing normally.' She managed a slight, sad smile.

'But then I suppose these are not normal circumstances.'

There was no sign of the tearful young woman they had last seen in the pit a few hours earlier, and Liz had to admire her composure. She had come to see if they were comfortable and to explain the situation.

'We do understand,' the Doctor assured her. 'Your father is only doing what he thinks is best. I'm sure we can resolve the matter amicably. But there is one thing you could do for us to ease our minds.'

'Of course. What is it?'

'Promise you will not accept any treatment if Sternberg should offer it, whether from the ampules or his tissue samples. Whatever he claims, they are a product of a science far beyond his understanding, and could be extremely dangerous if misused.'

Amelia smiled reassuringly. 'It's all right, Doctor. I have no intention of doing so. I've been thinking about the possibility over the last couple of hours, naturally. I was tempted, but then I realized it was not...well, meant for me, if you understand. What I am is a test of my faith. No doubt the purpose will be revealed in due course. Meanwhile, I must make the best of things as they are.'

The Doctor gave his best father confessor smile in return.

'I'm very glad to hear that, my dear.'

'Anyway,' she continued more cheerfully, 'we should be afloat again shortly. The hull's fixed and they've anchored a winch line about a coral head in the lagoon and will be pulling us free as the tide comes in. You may feel the ship rock about a bit, but don't worry. Then you can go ashore and wait for your people to pick you up, if you want.'

'With any luck,' said Liz heavily.

'By a sort of time machine?'

'More or less,' confirmed the Doctor.

She looked at them intently. 'I'm bursting with questions to ask you about the future, really. So would father be if he wasn't so preoccupied; and the Professor too, if this other thing hadn't gotten to him so. But now...I'm not sure it would be a good idea to know about one's destiny. I think you should just go back to where you should be again and we'll get on with our lives in our own way.'

'That sounds like a very sensible idea,' the Doctor confirmed.

After Amelia had left they were silent for a minute. Then Liz asked: 'If they were used properly, could these alien drugs actually make an arm grow back again?'

The Doctor smiled in understanding. 'Amelia Grover has made her choice,' he reminded her.

'Yes, but if anybody deserves something like that, she does.'

'Hear, hear!' said Mike. 'What about it, Doctor? Couldn't you maybe fix it for her? Sternberg may not be up to it, but surely you could –'

'No.' The Doctor spoke quietly but firmly. 'It is one of those times when one dares not interfere, because the repercussions would be too great. Besides, though the Semquess are quite capable of creating a regenerative drug with polyphase DNA that would work on human tissue, whether that is what is in the remaining ampules is another matter. Both Grover and Sternberg have let their personal desires convince them it is, or at least, can be modified to serve that purpose. Hopefully, Amelia Grover will do as she says and not accept any treatment Sternberg offers, whatever pressure is put upon her.'

'She'll stick to her word,' endorsed Mike.

'But supposing he does find out how to open those ampules, or extracts something from those samples eventually,' Liz suggested, 'and his experiments show they actually do re-grow limbs, or something equally dramatic?

Even if Amelia still refuses, it doesn't mean Sternberg won't try it on somebody else. There'll be plenty of people willing to take the risk.'

'Which is why it must never be allowed to happen. If necessary, when we get back to HQ, we'll use the time bridge to intercept the *Constitution* while she's still at sea and destroy the ampules and samples.'

'A commando raid!' Mike exclaimed.

'Something subtler than that, I hope,' replied the Doctor tolerantly.

'I knew we'd get to the *Boy's Own* bit eventually,' Liz said with satisfaction. 'But before you start planning the mission, I want to know more about these Semquess creatures. And what about the alien who had their drugs on him? What are they all doing here?'

‘And these sea tanks,’ Mike added.

‘Well in brief,’ said the Doctor, ‘the Semquess come from a largely water covered world, and evolved near volcanic fissures in deep ocean trenches, where they developed a special form of biochemistry making use of the extremes of heat, cold and pressure they lived in. They now sell specially tailored drugs and genetic adjusters to other races.’

‘What do they actually look like?’ asked Mike.

‘In Earth terms, rather like a cross between an octopus and a jellyfish. You saw the remains of one earlier.’

‘Oh, I’m beginning to understand. Go on.’

‘Well the sea tanks are the Semquess’ space suits, you might say. They certainly need them. You saw what happened to the tank and its driver when the pressure was released. And I suspect the explosion which crippled the *Constitution* when it crossed the reef was caused by it striking another of their tanks, which was entering or leaving the lagoon.’

‘So they’ve been here for a few days,’ asked Mike.

‘Perhaps a few weeks.’

‘But what for?’ wondered Liz.

The Doctor rubbed his chin thoughtfully. ‘I’m not certain, but possibly they want the box of drugs back. It’s all I can think of that would motivate them sufficiently to risk what is to them a very hostile environment.’

‘You said this was a hostile environment for the giant alien as well.’

‘Yes, curious. Perhaps the giant was hiding from them in the most unlikely place it could find. Remember the shield device near the spaceship?’

‘I missed that,’ said Mike. ‘What was it doing?’ Liz explained quickly. Mike frowned. ‘But why try to hide a whole island? Wouldn’t just a bit do?’

‘Because you don’t search what looks like an empty piece of ocean as thoroughly as you would even a small island,’ the Doctor explained. ‘Especially when the high conductivity and heat capacity of water

would draw the heat out of your quarry's body and spaceship dangerously quickly, and make it impossible to hide there for long.'

'But the shield is failing now,' Liz pointed out. 'So the Semquess were able to track the giant down. But it's been here for fifty years at least. Surely they haven't been hanging around all that time?'

'They are a long lived race,' the Doctor said. 'And they keep grudges. Perhaps the drugs were stolen from them. They might have been waiting on the Moon, monitoring the Earth, knowing that the other alien was down here somewhere but not exactly where. Then they detected the failing shield and were able to narrow down the field of search. The samples you and Miss Grover saw them taking, Sergeant, were no doubt to confirm that their drugs were responsible for the unusual growth on the island. Of course, they are not adapted to this environment, so it's slow and dangerous work. They haven't found the alien or its spacecraft yet, but it's only a matter of time.'

Liz had been musing. 'You know, grudges or not, and even allowing for alien psychology and time sense, this is still a tremendous effort to go through just to recover three ampules of drugs. We know the properties of the one that must have been let loose here accidentally, but what about the other two?

What's worth a fifty year search? And what will they do if they find out Sternberg has them now?'

Thirteen

o you see,' Nancy concluded, with a despairing sigh, 'it was al

'S

l a frightful misunderstanding. But my husband simply won't listen to me anymore.' She allowed herself a little sob. 'I'm...afraid it's all over between us.'

'It's a rotten shame all right, Mrs Grover,' Ferraro conceded. 'And we could all see Mr Grover thought the world of you before.'

'Oh, he did...At least, he made a great *show* of loving me.'

She paused significantly. 'But things weren't all as they should have been in private, if you get my meaning. Not always quite...satisfactory. He is a middle-aged man, after all.

And I'm quite a bit younger than he is.' She edged closer to him as he sat rather upright on the sofa.

'Yes...I can see you are, Mrs Grover,' he agreed.

'Call me Nancy. And you're David, aren't you? I think we know each other well enough to dispense with the formalities.

And, after all, I won't be Mrs Grover much longer.'

'That's awful sad...Nancy. But I hope you'll still keep making films.'

'I'm afraid that is most unlikely, in the circumstances. In fact, I don't know how I'm going to support myself in any halfway decent manner...' She let her shoulders sag hopelessly.

'I haven't got much put aside...Nancy, but if –'

'Oh, you are so generous, David – a real gentleman. But that isn't what I meant at all. But...if you really would like to help?'

'Sure, if I can.'

'Then there is one little favour you could do that would give me some security. It wouldn't take long and it isn't really dangerous, but it's something I can't do myself. It's a man's job.'

He looked slightly uncertain but sounded resolute. 'What is it?'

'The giant in the pit. Did you see its eye, behind that mask thing?'

'Yeah. It looked red and glittered a little.'

'Well while everybody else was busy talking, I looked at that carefully. I heard the Doctor call it a crystal. Now, what if it's a ruby? Think what it might be worth!'

'And you want me to get it for you?'

'Please, David. Without anybody else knowing, of course.'

'They said it was some kind of creature from some other world; you want me to cut out its eye?'

'But it's been dead for years. And I heard that Doctor say it was really some kind of stone to start with, so it's not as though it was ever properly alive. It doesn't belong to anyone, and if this island is going

to be blown up by the volcano in a few hours, it's going to be destroyed anyway, so what does it matter?'

He wavered, frowning. Nancy slid even closer and rested her hand gently on his.

'I'd truly be very grateful,' she said huskily, fixing him with her intense blue eyes. There was a long pause as he considered the possible meaning of her words. From that moment she knew she had him in the palm of her hand. It didn't matter whether, deep down, he knew she was playing up to him for her own purposes. If he realized it was an act, then it was an act he wanted very badly to believe in. She had him. She gave a silvery laugh. 'You'd be my David, going up against Goliath, like in the Bible. Wouldn't that be something?'

Ferraro squared his shoulders. 'Okay, I'll do it.'

'Oh, thank you!' she said. And meant it. Then she bent forward and kissed him delicately on the lips. He tried to resist in a half-hearted way, as though acutely aware she was still the wife of his employer. Nancy simply smiled and kissed him again. This time there was hardly any resistance at all.

The Brigadier surveyed the laboratory with some satisfaction at last.

The replacement accumulators were installed and being charged. The untidy mess of emergency transformers and temporary power cables had been cleared away and the whole place was beginning to seem functional again. Good. He was a firm believer in the principle that if something looked neat and clean it worked better. That was true of both machines and men, in his experience.

Osgood stepped over to him and reported smartly.

'Everything running smoothly, sir. All accumulator banks will be fully charged in another hour.'

The Brigadier glanced at his watch. 'Which means we shall be ready almost half an hour early. Well done, Osgood.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Of course, that still left the volcano to contend with. From what they could see of it through the portal it appeared exactly as it had when the Doctor first went through, but he'd no doubt it would perform on time. Well, he'd taken all the precautions he could, and it was a good

maxim not to worry about things beyond one's control. His main concern, if he had to make a pick-up away from the crater, was steering the portal. Still, he gathered from Liz Shaw's notes that increased power should improve the spatial control. Of course, if the missing three turned up before then, it would save him the trouble. Quite what he would say to the Doctor for getting himself into such a mess in the first place, and, incidentally, putting them to all this bother, he still wasn't certain. But he was sure that inspiration would not fail him when the time came.

He was just turning over some choice phrases in his mind when Benton entered the lab with another sheaf of papers.

'Don't tell me, Benton. More reports from America?'

'And beyond, sir. You'd better take a look.'

Benton spread the papers out in sequence on a workbench and the Brigadier scanned them rapidly.

The US East Coast had fully succumbed to the illusions now, but the nature of the sightings, whatever they were, had become even stranger and more persistent. New York harbour authorities reported multiple sightings of ghostly ships in Long Island Sound and the East River. Some witnesses claimed they were previously unknown classes of warship, and talked of a veritable fleet of them assembling and heading out to sea. Civil liberties groups immediately accused the military of experimenting with a new type of camouflage system and testing it on an unsuspecting public. Lethbridge-Stewart suspected that the relevant authorities would have been only too happy were that the truth. Buildings were now also coming and going, it seemed. An old warehouse in Brooklyn, demolished the day before, could now be seen intermittently, standing once more amid the rubble, but subtly altered, as though it had been renovated. He had heard of haunted houses, but never of the spirit of a house itself, let alone a warehouse. It was utter nonsense on the face of it. Yet it seemed to be happening. And on top of all that, the saucer sightings continued, and even more people claimed to have seen ghosts of the more conventional form.

Then he came to the next report.

'Japan, now, Benton?'

'Apparently so, sir. And some mention of skyscrapers coming and going in Hong Kong. Maybe also in China, though they're being a bit cagey about admitting anything's wrong.'

‘That would be in character.’

He read the Japanese reports quickly. More of what America had already suffered, it seemed, from the nature of the sightings in most major cities. The biggest worry to the authorites there, in their more ordered society, was the fear of mass panic and loss of trust in government. A real powder keg there, he thought. He noted that there were more reports of old buildings temporarily replacing new ones than there had been in America. Was that significant?

‘Anyway, one thing is certain,’ he said aloud. ‘This problem is international in scope now, and that means it’s our responsibility.’

He strode briskly out of the laboratory and back towards his office, with Benton at his heels. ‘While it stayed within their borders it was the Americans’ show, and we held a watching brief out of courtesy. But now it’s become UN

business. Send a message to Geneva and New York confirming our involvement. Request the usual facilities be made ready should we need them: cooperation of national armed forces, military communications networks and so on.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And send out a request to all our offices worldwide. They are to inform us the moment anything peculiar starts happening in their area, if it hasn’t already.’

‘Understood, sir.’

‘And also have copies of all available material on these odd events, especially film and picture evidence and any scientific measurements, if anybody’s got around to that yet, sent here automatically. I want an impressively large stack of material waiting for the Doctor and Miss Shaw when they get back.’

‘Always hoping they do, sir.’

‘They will, Benton. The Doctor won’t avoid his responsibilities to UNIT that easily.’ He hesitated, then added:

‘But you’d better get a squad briefed and ready to take through the bridge to make a search, just in case they don’t turn up or signal by eighteen hundred.’

‘Yes, sir.’

It was easier than he thought to slip away from the ship and the activity on the beach.

Ferraro inspected the winch and the hawser couplings with McCloud, then went down on to the sand and took a final look at the hull. Casually he strode over to the guards still positioned along the head of the beach under the shade of the palms. He exchanged a few cheery words, handed out cigarettes and reminded them that they would be away in just a few more hours. It was clear all would be glad to be gone from the place. The gruesome deaths of their comrades the night before had been bad enough, but the unexplained leaflet drop from the sky warning of the volcano had them all jumpy and uncertain. He did his best to calm them, saying Grover was going to take no chances.

When he reached the last man in the line, however, he lowered his voice slightly.

‘Wallace, I didn’t mention it to the others because it might not come off, but I’m going to try to pick up a few personal things from the guys who didn’t make it back last night.

What’s left of them, anyway. It rankled me that we had to leave them like that, you understand?’

Wallace nodded grimly.

‘I might be an hour or so, but don’t worry.’

‘Want me to come along?’

‘Thanks, but if I do find anything left it won’t be pretty and I wouldn’t ask anybody else to take on this sort of job. I’ve got my rifle, and I’ll keep my eyes open, you can bet.’

‘Okay, good luck.’

And Ferraro slipped past him through the belt of palms and into the great forest.

Fortunately the path they had made that morning leading to the pit was easy to find, and he hurried along it, glancing about him anxiously as he went. As long as the island’s monsters let him alone for just an hour he’d be home free, and the place could blow up and

sink under the waves for all he cared. He checked again the rope wound around his waist, the hammer and chisel in his pockets, and the sack to carry the eye gem, or whatever fragments he could chip off it.

He reached the pit in twenty minutes. The ladder was still in place, but he hesitated for a moment as he saw the ungainly figure of the dead giant staring up at him. Could that thing ever really have been alive? What a crazy story. All those scientist types had to be slightly cracked, he supposed. It felt better to think of the thing simply as a hunk of rock, but he found it still took an effort to put his foot on the first rung of the ladder. The memory of Nancy's lips against his spurred him on. To think that a beautiful woman like her could just go for an ordinary guy like him. Of course, there couldn't be anything serious in it while he was just a seaman and was only doing her a favour like this. But if he took a share from the eye, and that was only fair, after all, then he could set himself up in style. Then she'd realize he was the only man for her.

And he'd treat her right, too. Grover had probably spoiled her.

A woman like that needed a firm hand.

Ferraro climbed down into the pit and stood before the towering figure. Now he looked more closely he could clearly see the sparkle of its single eye behind the helmet visor, which reminded him of the faceplate of a diver's helmet. He was surprised nobody else had paid it much attention at the time.

But of course, they had been diverted by the discovery of the drug box and then the row between Nancy and Grover. And now nobody was giving it any thought because all they wanted was to get off the island.

He unslung his rope and, after a few practice swings, threw the end over the giant's shoulder so that it dangled down its back where he could reach it. He tied it about one of its legs just above the knee and pulled it taut. Hand over hand he climbed the massive body until he was standing on its shoulder, braced against one of its upraised and extended arms. He felt uneasy, perched up there, and not because of the height. The material of the giant's suit gave slightly under his boots, constantly reminding him of its disconcerting origin.

He forced himself to ignore the sensation and, placing a hand carefully against the huge helmet, leaned forward to stare at the eye, which

glittered back tantalizingly at him.

Upon closer examination, after brushing away the dust, he found the visor was actually formed of a fine mesh screen over a shell of very clear, non-reflective glass, presumably to give it extra protection. There were two large knobs with fluted sides set on either side of the visor frame. Did they release it? Experimentally he twisted the nearer one. It did not move. He tried pulling with both hands, and he felt it lift as though against the resistance of an internal spring. Now it twisted about a quarter turn before locking again. He saw that one side of the visor had moved an inch forward, clear of the frame in which it had been seated. Awkwardly he clambered over the dome top of the helmet and repeated the procedure on the other side. Now he straddled the helmet once more, grasped the top rim of the visor and pulled. It lifted stiffly, rotating about the side pivots until it rested on the forehead of the helmet. He scrambled back to his original position, braced himself again, and peered hesitantly in at the eye.

To his relief it did not seem at all human, or indeed to resemble anything living or dead. He took out a pocket torch and shone it in upon the alien orb. Now it lit up, almost as though it were glowing, and he could see the sparkles and twinkles within as he moved the beam about. Surely it couldn't be a ruby, that was just too much to hope for. He turned over the little he knew of gems stones in his mind.

Garnet was also red, wasn't it? And even though they were only reckoned to be semi-precious, a stone this size would still be worth a fortune. Yes, he could believe in that. And even if it wasn't garnet, it had to be worth something simply as a curio. Maybe he could chip the whole thing out in one piece?

He peered at it more intently, examining the socket, wondering how deep it was set. But his torch kept swinging back to irradiate the depths of the eye. The sparkles, like frozen fireflies within, entranced him.

He stared longer and deeper...and deeper.

'You *must* tell me, Doctor,' Sternberg pleaded. 'How may these cursed ampules be opened properly?'

Liz felt some pity for Sternberg's predicament. She suspected he had had to swallow his pride to come and beg for help like this, after his earlier words in the pit. How frustrated he must feel to have such secrets within his grasp, yet be denied them by the simple matter of

an unopenable bottle!

Evidently the Doctor felt the same way, for his reply was resolute but sympathetic.

‘I am really so sorry, Professor. But I cannot allow you to use those drugs.’

‘But you already know of these things, somehow. So you must know how they are opened!’

‘Perhaps, but I will not tell you.’

‘I will inform Mr Grover of your stubbornness. He will force the information from you!’

‘I think not,’ said the Doctor calmly. ‘His behaviour earlier was quite atypical, if I’m any judge – the product of momentary necessity. I cannot believe he would resort to violence now.’

Sternberg’s shoulders slumped. He must have known his threat was an empty one. ‘Then I shall persevere despite you, Doctor. I will discover the trick of opening those ampules eventually. I will have my triumph!’

‘That is your choice,’ the Doctor acknowledged, ‘just as non-cooperation is mine. But I remind you again of the possible danger, should you succeed in opening those ampules. There is a time and place for such discoveries, Professor, and now is not it!’

But the warning fell upon deaf ears once more, as the guard let Sternberg out of their cabin and locked the door again behind him.

‘Squad ready, sir,’ Benton announced.

‘Very well.’ The Brigadier surveyed the line of soldiers mustered in the corridor outside the laboratory. ‘Right men.

Stand easy for the moment.’ The Brigadier entered the lab with Benton.

‘Accumulators fully charged, sir,’ Osgood reported.

‘Good. Anything to report?’ he enquired of the soldier on watch before the image coil.

‘No sign of them, sir.’

‘And the volcano?’

‘Activity as before, as far as I can tell, sir.’

‘All right. To your places everybody. Powering up.’

The equipment hummed into renewed life. The Brigadier took the portal vertically upwards and rotated it through a complete circle. The island seemed just as it had been before.

‘Full power. Let’s see how the control has improved.’ He directed the portal down and out over the crater wall. It started smoothly, but before he’d reached the edge of the forest, the image started to sway drunkenly about again, despite his best efforts. Eventually he pressed the reset and the portal returned to its starting position in the crater.

‘It’s improved, but not much, blast it! It would be almost impossible to get back through with it dancing about like that, at least, not amongst the trees. We’ll have to work out an alternate remote recovery procedure, Benton. Still willing to go?’

‘Of course, sir. But they may turn up yet, or signal. It’s still half an hour until they would expect us to be ready.’

‘Possibly, Benton. But I’ve decided not to chance it.

Prepare to take the squad through in five minutes. If the signal appears at eighteen hundred, there will be time for you to return to the crater before attempting to pick up the Doctor, Miss Shaw and Yates. If not, we’ve gained half an hour extra for the search. And if they’re alive but trapped somewhere down there, that could be crucial!’

Nancy was pacing the decks anxiously when she saw Ferraro emerge from the forest and stride swiftly across to the yacht.

Her heart leapt in relief. He was carrying a sack in his hand, but she couldn’t tell if it contained anything or not. Still, she reasoned, a fortune in ruby chips would not take up much room. She watched him go below and hurried back to her own cabin to wait as arranged.

Ten slow minutes passed without the expected knock on her door.

What could have delayed him? Perhaps he was busy with essential work for the impending re-launch of the ship? She went back out on deck again impatiently, hoping to catch sight of him and at least get a sign that he had been successful.

She was just in time to see Ferraro descending the ladder to the beach once more. But he was now carrying two bright metal cans with hermetically sealed caps, of the kind that was often used to hold water or fuel in hot climates. What was he doing with them and why go out again? Something must have gone wrong, but why hadn't he come to her to explain? She saw him walk determinedly across the sand, exchange a few words with one of the sentries, and disappear into the forest once more.

His unaccountable behaviour left her in an agony of uncertainty. Should she go after him? If something had gone wrong, he might need help. Or what if he was trying to double-cross her? Either way she had to know immediately.

There was not enough time left to play things casually. Which meant she would have to conquer her fear and follow him.

Steeling herself, she made her way down to the beach and a few steps across the sand towards the forest. But how was she to slip past the sentries? Though everybody was tactfully ignoring her after her disgrace, if she insisted she wanted to go into the forest, Grover's orders about an escort still remained in force, and she could hardly follow Ferraro in those circumstances.

Then came a shout from the lookout on deck: 'Fire over the volcano!'

Nancy saw a tiny ball of red fire trailing a thread of smoke behind it rise over the tree tops. Fear clutched at her. The eruption was beginning and they were not even afloat yet! She spun round to see the figure of Captain Pascoe appear on deck, grasping a pair of binoculars. After a moment he called out reassuringly: 'It's okay. They're only flares. Somebody must be firing them off the top of the volcano.' There was a murmur of relief and puzzlement. Some of the guards curiously moved out from their shelters to see for themselves, though the actual summit itself was obscured by the lofty tree tops. Distantly there came the echo of three regularly spaced rifle shots. Then another flare rose into view. Of course. It was the other members of the British expedition. They were obviously signalling to

their lost companions.

Then she realized that, for a moment, everybody was ignoring her. All eyes were turned to the sky.

Nancy seized the chance and ran for the trees. In seconds she had disappeared into their shade in pursuit of Ferraro.

‘Millar and Johnson, keep watch up here,’ Benton ordered.

They were standing on the crater rim next to the remains of a campfire, presumably the Doctor and Liz Shaw’s, with the island spread out before them. There was still no sign of any signal, and the sun, shimmering slightly oddly, Benton noticed, was already sinking towards the horizon. When it rose again the island would no longer exist.

‘You’ll be radio relay between us and Davies down by the portal, who’ll pass messages through to the lab,’ he continued briskly. ‘Let us know if you see anything, and keep sending those flares up at regular intervals.’

‘Understood, Sarge,’ said Millar. ‘Uh...what if the volcano starts to do its thing early, while we’re still up here?’

‘Then you’ll have to decide which way you’re going to run, won’t you? The line we strung across the bottom of the crater will guide you back to the portal through the steam, but if there’s no time, just make for the nearest beach. Don’t worry, the Brig’s ready to pick us up there just in case.’

As long as we can jump through the portal while it’s waltzing all over the place, he reminded himself. He turned to the rest of the squad.

‘All right, spread out. I want a fifty yard separation as we enter the trees. Keep your radios on open channel at all times.

Report anything suspicious, or that might give us a clue to where the others are. Let’s get started.’

They set off down the side of the mountain.

Nancy was trembling with nervous exhaustion by the time she reached the pit.

She had flinched at every rustle in the undergrowth in the course of

her journey, expecting at any moment to see some monstrous creature spring out at her. At one point she had come across a huge bird with a body the size of an ostrich, supported on almost comically short legs, which pecked and scratched under the trees for grubs. She had barely stifled a scream, but the bird had merely blinked at her curiously for a moment, then continued feeding. And then she had almost run into a black beetle as big as a dog that trundled across her path, leaving her weak with shock. She hated bugs, she hated this island. If she had her way, the world would be full of wonderful, exciting cities, and she'd never have to go out in the wilds again!

At last she saw the fallen tree that rested across the edge of the pit ahead of her. As she staggered weakly up to it, she heard a scraping, cracking noise. Then a rushing sound and a muffled crash. Peering uncertainly round the tree, she saw Ferraro heaving at a dead branch, dragging it from the pile the sailors had made when they cleared the top of the pit that morning. He pulled the branch to the edge, heaved it over into the depths of the pit, then immediately went back for another one. There was a feverish intensity about his activity. Clearly it was important, but she could not begin to guess why.

She stepped over to the edge of the pit as he began hauling on another branch and looked down. The giant's visor had been raised, revealing the eye gem to be still in place and intact. She turned to him.

'David, what are you doing? Why couldn't you get the eye out like we planned?'

She had to repeat herself before he appeared to realize she was there. When she did get his attention, his eyes seemed not quite to focus upon her. She saw he was panting with effort and sweat ran down his face and stained his shirt.

'Got to get the wood...into the pit,' he stated in flat, breathless tones, as though that was explanation enough.

'But why? What for?'

'Must have a fire...for heat.'

'What? Oh, I get it...' A vague understanding began to dawn. Heat cracked stone, didn't it? Obviously he had failed to dig the gem out with the tools he had and was trying another method. It was a smart idea.

'You mean you need a fire to get the eye gem out?'

He looked at her blearily for a moment, almost puzzled, chest heaving, swaying slightly. ‘Yes…needs heat…to get free,’ he said, before catching hold of another branch.

Nancy gazed at him in surprise and wonder. He was single-mindedly driving himself into the ground to get the gem for her, and she felt unaccustomed gratitude rising within. She helped him as best she could to pull the branch across and topple it into the pit – ignoring the scratches she picked up in the process – and then the next, until all the loose wood was gone. Without another word, Ferraro climbed down the ladder and Nancy followed. The metal cans she had seen him carry off the ship were already down there. Some branches had fallen at the feet of the giant, but Ferraro threw on more until the pile was six feet high. Then he unscrewed one of the cans and Nancy smelt gasoline. Ferraro splashed it over the pile and stood back, fumbling for matches. He struck one and tossed it on to the pile. The wood caught with a rush and pop of blue fire. Flames licked up about the giant’s legs. The heat made Nancy cover her eyes and back away. She felt the draft from along the tunnel that Amelia and Yates had escaped down. It was feeding the flames and the pit was acting like a chimney. That was good, she realized, because the fire would draw better and burn hotter.

Eagerly she watched the fire grow brighter. The dirt and grime of the years seemed to flake off the giant’s outer suit, exposing its original dead black surface underneath. As it grew hotter she noticed it began to glisten slightly. Ferraro went to throw another branch on the fire, but she put a restraining hand on his arm.

‘No, let’s see if this is enough. We’ve got to let it burn itself out before we can get to the eye, remember.’

His arm swung out as though he were swatting a fly. The back of his hand caught her across the face with stinging force, sending her sprawling to the ground.

As she lay there, stunned and uncomprehending, she saw him throw the branch on to the blaze, then stand stock still, as though waiting, staring at the giant figure now wreathed in flame and smoke. There was something so arresting in his posture that the spleen she was going to vent upon him for being a fool and a double-crossing bastard died in the back of her throat. Inexorably, her eyes also turned to the giant.

Very, very slowly, after so many long years, its arms were dropping

back down to its sides.

For a moment she thought the heat was cracking whatever the giant was made of. But the motion was too smooth. Then she saw the great head turn and lower, until its cyclopean gaze rested upon Ferraro and herself.

It was alive.

Nancy screamed in pure terror, scrabbling to her feet and backing away into the tunnel mouth. Something soft and sticky brushed her shoulder and clung. She tried to pull away but other tendrils twined about her, and the more she struggled, the more entangled she became. It was the remains of the spider web that had trapped Amelia. Though its maker was dead, it had claimed one last victim.

Now she felt the eye of the giant full upon her. She tried to look away, but she could not. Her screams faded into nothing.

The giant raised its arm again, but this time it was pointing.

Pointing at her. And its eye glowed redder and redder. Not with the reflected light of the fire, but from deep within.

Fourteen

eat. Warmth. Life. Brokk slowly revived as energy Hcoursed once more through the intricate crystalline structure of his eye-brain. Solid state synapses began to function, releasing the memories frozen within by years of terrible cold.

He remembered.

His craft began to malfunction as he entered the lower atmosphere.

Cabin pseudo-gravity failed, and he felt the heavy world tug him back into his control chair. It was an effort to move his arms, despite the bracing of his suit. He was losing altitude, but all he could see below him through the murky atmosphere was a freezing ocean of hydrogen oxide. Was there no solid land on this world? Then his long range scanner detected an island ahead. Upon it the infra-red sensor indicated one point of tolerable warmth. Could he reach it? He did, but just barely. Still losing altitude, he crossed the oddly formed shoreline and found himself flying over a strange landscape of dark, low-spreading, cold-adapted vegetation, somehow drawing sustenance from the feeble light of the planet's distant sun. The heat source grew

stronger and he pinpointed its location. On his vision plate he saw a hot spring issuing from a crater in the summit of a sharply angled hill.

Good. It would provide a site both of power and concealment from any native life forms. He had detected virtually no electromagnetic radiation from the planet that would indicate significant technology, so there was little possibility of local assistance in his repairs, and he wanted no contact with primitive beings in his present circumstances.

But even as he made his landing approach the overstrained hull creaked and split open. Freezing air rushed in, chilling him dangerously before he could close the visor of his insulating suit. Warning lights lit up across his control panel.

There was a lurch as a thruster unit failed. He dropped lower over the crater, fighting for control, bringing his ship in under the shelter of the cliff, the remaining thrusters on overload as they compensated for the heavy gravity. There was a bump and grating on the hull, the ship settled, and then was still. He was down safely.

Savage joy surged through him. He had made it, despite the Semquess' interference. He might be temporarily marooned on a hostile world, but he would survive. And, when the time came, make his escape back to civilization again.

He adjusted the power system of his suit to compensate for the high gravity and climbed awkwardly to his feet. Not comfortable, but he would get used to it. He would have to.

Then he saw the case of ampules was lying open on the floor. The jolting that the ship had received on the approach run must have shaken it loose and the high gravity had done the rest. Anxiously he gathered up the ampules, checking to see if they were damaged. Two he found easily enough, for there was little floor space in the ship's single cabin. But the third was nowhere to be seen. Instead his eye fell upon a rent in the hull in one corner of the cabin which ran down to the deckplates, and through which he could now see a section of dark rock. A terrible apprehension filled him. Could the missing ampule have slipped through it? Yes, the gap was certainly wide enough.

If so it was now lying somewhere in that freezing landscape, probably beyond the crater wall.

Brokk pulled himself together. Self pity was not the Grold way. He would not give up on the missing ampule yet, but there were other priorities to be taken care of first. He put the insulated ampule case

into his belt pouch, not wanting to risk another accident. Sealing his suit completely and adjusting its heating unit, he opened the main hatch and stepped cautiously out on to the alien soil.

The dull sky over the small crater, with its tiny cold sun, was bleak and depressing. The only cheer emanated from the hot spring spewing up from its centre, amid a column of tepid gas and vapour. A few splashes of liquid rock fell on his suit and the hull, darkening and solidifying rapidly. For some moments he basked in the homely warmth of the fountain, before regretfully turning to the essential repairs.

There were several rents and missing panels in the hull, blown away by the missile that had disabled his hyper-drive unit, but they all appeared to be within the capabilities of the auto-repair system. He opened up the feed hopper in the side of the hull, took out a scoop, and began shovelling in loose rock and ash from the crater floor. The analyser showed it was moderately high in metal ore, which the system would extract and purify, then re-shape by force field controlled vapour deposition to replace the missing hull segments. He set the controls to the task and closed the hopper again.

While that job continued automatically, he examined the rest of the damage. Fortunately the thruster unit would only need the replacement of a few severed connections. The hyperdrive, however, would be a longer job. Some units he carried as plug-in spares, but others would need rebuilding. It would be several dex's work at least, which meant he would be marooned here for longer than he thought. Might that give the Semquess ship that was inevitably following the trail of its predecessor a chance to track him down? No, they would not think of looking for him on such a hostile world. They would reason that he had headed in for a world closer to the local sun, or had drifted free in space, or had even landed on an asteroid for repairs. Unless.

An unpleasant possibility struck him.

Intently he began examining the apparently undamaged sections of the ship's hull, looking for –

There it was!

A thin circular disc, slightly swollen in the middle, which he could have covered with his palm. It was the same matt black as his hull and almost invisible. A Semquess tracer, ejected from the missile as it

struck. They had planned further ahead than he had given them credit for! He tore the patch off and crushed it in his hands. But the damage was done. They would certainly trace him to this world now, even if they had no more accurate fix. Then they would ensure he never left it alive.

Brokk re-entered the ship. He had something that would help him stay hidden. Shortly he emerged again, carrying a thermal probe generator and a distortion field emitter. He located a small steaming vent a little way from the ship and began drilling. The sonic disrupter mounted on its tip drove the probe smoothly down through the rock, trailing the thermophilic conductor cable behind it. When the readings showed it had reached the pool of liquid rock that fed the fountain, he stopped the drill and attached the distortion emitter. The air over the island shimmered and rippled. He made some adjustments and the effect settled down. Now he was cloaked across a wide spectrum of frequencies from all but the most deliberate of external examinations. He also now had a power source independent of the ship's systems. He had bought himself time. Time to make the repairs and to search for the missing ampule.

He saw the tiny sun was fast setting. It was not a phenomenon that he was personally familiar with. The rotation of his homeworld was gravitationally locked, and, apart from slow liberation effects about the terminator zone, the position of its sun was almost constant in the sky. He adjusted his chronometer to record its motion so that he could synchronize with the local day–night cycle. He dare not begin his search before dark, for fear of how much further the temperature would drop, quite apart from the lack of light.

Therefore he would work on the hyperdrive repairs for as long as possible, and make his first exploration beyond the crater after the next sunrise.

The climb out of the crater the following morning was more arduous than he had expected. The slope was only moderately steep and the ascent itself not that great. But even with the power bracing of his suit, it was hard work. He had to cut foot and hand holds for himself in the most difficult places, which added to his exhaustion and drained more power from his suit in compensation than he had expected. Eventually he reached the crater rim, however, and stared out at the alien landscape in some wonder.

The frigid ocean rolling away to the unnaturally flat and distant horizon on all sides, gave him an uncomfortable sense of isolation.

This was no world for a Grold, but he would have to make the best of it. At least the slope down the outside of the crater was gentler than the inside had been. Cautiously, Brokk began to make his way down, and soon entered the zone of thicker vegetation that skirted the crater hill.

The growths ranged in size, but at the most were only twice his height, and some lesser forms only brushed his ankles.

They were formed of strange, fibrous, insubstantial stuff, that bent out of his way as he brushed past and then swayed back into place again. Occasionally they moved on their own with the currents of the heavy air. The motion was unsettling, as it almost made them seem alive, which they were, in a way, he supposed. But they were unlovely things – nothing like the slender crystalline filament trees back home, which remained decently still, except for the ever-changing reflections and refractions within their pods and diamond leaves.

It was a shock when he saw the first signs of animal life.

Something multi-coloured and fast moving shot out from a tree he was passing and disappeared amid the foliage. It had actually propelled itself through the intervening space by rapid oscillations of its lateral extremities. Of course! The dense atmosphere made winged flight, powered only by muscular effort, possible. Elementary dynamics, perhaps, but rather startling to see in actuality. As he grew more accustomed to his surroundings, he began to note more brief flickers of motion about him, suggesting there were other life forms on the island. They were moving away as he approached. Well, that suited him perfectly. He was not here for xeno-botanical studies.

When his distance compass told him that he had reached the edge of the search area, he began to concentrate on the ground at his feet. It was possible the ampule might have got caught up in some of the higher growths, but he thought a small, hard object like that would probably have broken through their flimsy forms. Still, they did at least provide a contrast with what he sought. If it had only fallen clear of the lower growths, and had not buried itself in soft ground, he thought he stood a fair chance of finding it again. Though it was a small object, it was distinctive to his visual range. It was not an impossible search, merely a potentially arduous one.

He knew the descent flight path he had taken and had calculated the possible area the ampule could have fallen within. In any case, he might as well occupy his time searching in between making repairs, as

doing anything else.

He began working his way methodically down through the centre of the island towards the shore. At least he was reasonably certain that the ampule had not fallen into the ocean. If it had, it would have to remain there. He was not coming into contact with that freezing liquid. It would draw the heat right out of him in moments, despite the suit's insulation and power pack. But he was curious enough to want to take a look at the shoreline, from a safe distance, when he had finished his first sweep through the forest.

What he did not expect to find when he did so were signs of habitation.

The trees had thinned out suddenly and before he realized it, he was striding amongst a cluster of waist high structures built of sticks and fibrous mats that could only be simple dwellings, constructed from the local vegetation. As he bent to look closer, a swarm of dwarf figures burst out of the structures and scattered amongst the trees. They were compact, stocky bipeds, hardly reaching much beyond his knees, and some were even smaller than that. They were fleeing in obvious fear of him.

Brokk had no intention of becoming involved with the indigenous inhabitants, and he tried to back away into the forest once more. But as he turned he accidentally brushed against the projecting roof of one of the buildings. Instantly the flimsy structure collapsed.

This seemed to anger the indigenes. Most of them had disappeared through the trees and on to the shore, where they watched from a distance, but a ragged line, presumably of their warriors, was now advancing upon him, waving slender darts in a threatening manner. He stood his ground, wondering what to do next. He had no quarrel with them, but after inadvertently damaging their property he doubted if they would voluntarily leave him alone. A hail of darts rebounded harmlessly from his suit and faceplate. Could they be made to work for him, and was it worth the time to find out, he wondered, as pebbles followed the darts with similar results.

The little people started to back away uncertainly. If he planned to stay here for any length of time perhaps he could make use of them, but in the short term they might interfere with his search and repair work. It was simpler to drive them away.

He turned to the nearest structure, concentrating his heat beam. It

burst into flames at the merest touch. He tried a second structure with the same result. It was amazing how easily living things burnt here, but then the local biochemistry had to be fiercely active to function at such low temperatures, he realized.

Brokk let the fire spread by itself and soon most buildings in the settlement were burning. The heat was brief but welcome, and he stood amid the blazing ruins to draw on their warmth as he surveyed the results of his actions. The demonstration seemed to be sufficient, for the creatures had all retreated to the shore now. Slowly he followed after them, passing through the last of the trees and halting at the edge of a strip of pale soft ground that separated the trees from the ocean. Even as he appeared, the indigenes were frantically pushing a small flotilla of flimsy looking craft out through the heavy waves that broke along the shore and scrambling aboard them. They used paddles to propel the vessels out at surprising speed, and soon they were mere dots in the distance.

Brokk watched them go with satisfaction. He did not think they would be back for some time. And if they did get over their fright, finding their island again with the cloaking field in place might delay them further. Assuming there were no other such settlements, and that was surely unlikely in a place this size, he now had the island to himself for long enough to complete his task.

The beginning of a chill seeping up through his soles reminded him he was nearing the end of his endurance. Even with the suit's insulated over-shoes, the cold ground drew the heat from him. He began to make his way back to the crater, noting the area he had covered for the resumption of his search the next day.

For four local days Brokk worked on the repairs in between regular sweeps through the forest. On the fifth day the repairs to the hyperdrive unit and the hull were completed. Now it was simply a matter of the missing ampule and judging when it would be safe to attempt to leave the planet. Assuming the Semquess had traced him this far, how long would they maintain surveillance, and how thoroughly? He was not familiar enough with their species psychology to answer for certain, and he paced out a slightly longer path that day pondering the question.

And almost accidentally came upon the ampule.

The glittering edge of a fragment caught his eye. He soon found several more, scattered about the rock protruding through the forest

floor against which it had shattered. It seemed an unfair reward for his persistence. Still, it was the least valuable of the three, and he had found it relatively quickly. He might have spent as long again on the fruitless quest.

He began to make his way back to the crater once more. He wondered briefly if the Semquess drug would have any effect on the indigenous life of the island. It depended on whether or not their genetic structure was within the range that the drug was tailored for. Well, that was not his problem –

Without warning, the ground gave way under his right foot.

He fell heavily forward, his leg disappearing up to his hip.

Even as he struggled to pull free, the ground about him started to crack and his whole body began to slip into an ever-widening crevasse. He grasped desperately at the edges but they crumbled under his hands.

He fell into blackness.

The drop was not much more than his own height. Back home it would have been a minor accident. Here, under more than twice the gravity, he struck the ground with sickening force. He landed half on his side, some of the impact being absorbed by his backpack, but the shock was still sufficient to cause resonance disruption in his neuro-optical system. To a Grold, it was the equivalent of unconsciousness.

When Brokk came to he could already feel the cold seeping into him. Still half dazed he stiffly got to his feet, feeling for any tear in his suit. It appeared to be intact. What was wrong, then? He still had power in reserve. He activated the backpack read-out and found that the heat exchanger had failed. He must have damaged it in the fall. It was probably quite simple to repair, once he was back in his ship. But he wasn't in his ship. He was trapped and slowly freezing. Even if he could climb out of the hole, how long could he keep moving? Above him, tantalizingly out of reach, was the hole he had fallen through. Beyond, the feeble light of day was already failing, and with it he seemed to feel the energy draining out of him, even as he reached up futilely to claw at the edge of the pit.

The cold bit deeper.

A terrible numb lethargy seeped insidiously through him.

Despite his will to move, his body stiffened and froze into rigidity, with his arms upraised. The chill reached his eye-brain, slowing his mental functions. Blackness overwhelmed him.

But it was not death.

Grold did not die that easily.

The darkness was not quite total. Every day just enough light penetrated the pit to trigger a flash of helpless consciousness in his eye-brain. Just long enough for him to sluggishly recall his plight, and then the illumination fell below the critical threshold again and blackness returned.

Brokk counted over twenty thousand of those flashes while waiting for the release of madness or death.

Then came a flurry of light and movement. Brief flashes of illumination that were not sunlight – of little power but great significance. Artificial light! How far had the indigenes progressed since he had been down here? And then there was one steady light, shining directly into his eye-brain, and beyond it a tiny, grotesque figure like the ones he had chased from the island.

This was his chance.

He gathered all the energy he could from light and radiated images of his needs in rapid pulses through his eye and into the tiny cold-fluid orbs of the other, so that it flooded its mind and drove out all other thoughts.

Bring me heat! Make fire!

There was another moment of darkness.

Then he felt blessed warmth flooding through him. There was fire licking about his body. The thermosensitive covering of his suit automatically adjusted to absorb its radiations.

Memory returned in full and he raged against the caprice of fate.

His continued existence was still hanging by a thread. He must do anything to safeguard the fire that was for the moment his only means of survival.

He forced his limbs to respond again, and turned his head, taking in

his surroundings clearly for the first time. In the light of the fire he saw his thrall standing before him, while another of its kind struggled on the other side of the pit, entangled within some fine hanging mesh. He pointed at it.

Bring that one to me, he commanded, his eye pulses flickering now with their accustomed power.

The other, still struggling, was brought before him, as close to the fire as their fragile bodies could tolerate. He stilled its resistance with a glance and it stood placidly beside the other.

How easy it was to dominate their simple minds. Had he known what pliant tools these people were, he would have converted those primitives to his service instead of driving them away. He could have set *them* to find the ampule. He would never have fallen into this trap. What a fool he had been!

Brokk quelled his self-recrimination with an effort. Self-preservation came first. He poured his needs into the minds of his thralls.

You will keep this fire burning at all costs. You will help to release me from this place. You will help me return to my ship.

You will obey!

Fifteen

eaman Wallace looked unhappy under Pascoe's scrutiny, Sas the afternoon shadows lengthened across the sand.

'Mr Ferraro said he was going to burn the remains out in the forest, Captain. That's why he had the gasoline. He said there was nothing that could be decently taken back for a proper burial, and he didn't want any animals to get what was left.'

'And when was this?' Grover asked.

''Bout an hour ago, Mr Grover.'

'And nobody's seen anything of him since?' Pascoe asked of the little knot of guards. They all shook their heads.

'Or Nancy?' Amelia added. There was more head shaking.

'Mrs Grover was on the beach when we first saw the flares,' one volunteered. 'But I thought she'd gone back on board.'

‘Well she’s nowhere to be found now,’ Amelia replied.

‘She must have gone into the forest.’

‘But we know Nancy hated the forest,’ Montgomery asserted, joining the group, with de Veer and Dodgeson close behind him. He had spent most of the day sleeping off his exertions of the previous night. Now he looked remarkably fresh again. Amelia suspected he preferred late hours. ‘If she went in voluntarily, she must have had a darned good reason.

Something she wanted…or was trying to prove to us, maybe.’

‘But what?’ she asked. ‘She wouldn’t be playing pranks this close to sailing. Is it anything to do with Mr Ferraro’s disappearance?’ Nobody seemed to want to meet her eye or voice an opinion on the possibility, and the implications of the suggestion struck her. She realized they were trying to save her modesty and her father’s feelings.

Captain Pascoe spoke up. ‘If I’m going to get the ship free, we have to start now, and I’ll need all hands standing by for that and to ready it for sailing. Sorry, Mr Grover, but that’s how it’s got to be.’

Grover nodded. ‘I understand. Get started right now. Use all the men you need. The rest of us will work something out.’

Pascoe nodded and headed back for the ship, with the sailors trailing after him. Montgomery spoke up again.

‘Looks like another search party’s needed, old man. Well, I know Nancy and I have had our differences, but I’m still game, and I’m sure de Veer and Dodgeson here’ll lend a hand.’

It was an offer made without bravado. There was quite a decent person under Montgomery’s tattered façade, Amelia decided.

‘I’ll go as well,’ she said supportively. ‘I promise I won’t fall down any holes this time.’

‘I like your daughter, Grover.’ Montgomery grinned, but her father was frowning at her.

‘You really want to help find Ferraro – and Nancy?’ He led her a few paces away from the film makers and lowered his voice. ‘After what she said about you earlier?’

She laid her hand on his arm. ‘Pa, what Nancy said was spiteful and upsetting, but it really wasn’t such a surprise. I think it hurt you a lot more than it did me. But even so, you’re going to try to find her, aren’t you? Well, you can’t expect me to do any less.’

Her father sagged slightly. ‘I’ve been an old fool over her, haven’t I, Amy?’

‘No, Pa. You’ve just been yourself. Outside of business, you try to see the best in people. You can’t help being that way, any more than Nancy or I can be what we are. And she did make you happy most of the time, remember that. We’re simply stuck with our natures, I guess, and just have to make the best of them.’

He kissed her on the forehead. ‘Well don’t try to make anything else out of yours, Amy. It’s perfect as it is. And if you really want to help, and take a load off my mind, stay on the ship. Whatever happens from here on, I’ve lost Nancy, but I’m not risking losing you again. No argument. That’s an order.’

‘Okay, Pa. But look, what about Sergeant Yates, the Doctor and Miss Shaw? You’ve got to release them anyway.

Obviously their friends are already looking for them and might turn up here pretty soon. We don’t want any more trouble, and if you make it up with them, I’m sure they’d help look for Nancy and Mr Ferraro.’

‘Yes, maybe I’d better. Come on, then.’ They turned back to the yacht. ‘All right, Montgomery. You three had better draw some rifles and get ready. I’ve got to talk to our guests and then I’ll be with you.’

‘Will they be joining us too?’

‘I hope so.’

‘Good idea. That sound gadget of the Doctor’s would be mighty comforting to have along in case we meet up with those bats again.’

They all climbed aboard. Montgomery, de Veer and Dodgeson headed for the gun locker.

‘And do apologize properly for keeping them shut away,’

Amelia reminded Grover.

‘I had to, Amy. I couldn’t let them interfere.’

‘I understand, Pa. Just make sure they do.’

He looked at her sadly. ‘Sure you won’t reconsider taking the treatment if Sternberg comes up with something?’

‘Quite sure, Pa. I’m so grateful for what you tried to do for me. And I wish it hadn’t cost you like it did. But I still won’t take any concoction of Professor Sternberg’s.’

‘As you will. But you understand I won’t have those things destroyed, though. I promised Sternberg he could work on whatever he found here.’

‘I don’t want you to break your word, Pa. I just believe it isn’t meant to be.’

‘We’ll see, Amy. We’ll see.’

‘Millar to Benton, come in. Over.’

‘Benton receiving. Over.’

‘We can see some smoke down there in the forest. Just a little at first, but it’s getting thicker.’

‘That could be their signal. Sending up a flare now. Check our relative position.’

A few seconds later, a bright yellow point of light rose up over the tree tops.

‘Your marker sighted. You are about a mile northeast of it.’

‘Understood. Squad regrouping and making for smoke now. Inform base. Benton out.’

Smoke began to billow in earnest from the *Constitution*’s stack as the boilers were stoked up. Pumps chugged away, taking in water from a siphon over the stern and sending it through the heavy hose lines to the bow, where sailors directed the jets deep into the sand on either side of the prow.

Twin streams began to flow back down around the hull, seeping into the sand and lubricating the natural slip-way that the ship had gouged out for itself. Then McCloud started the winch, drawing the hawser in over the stern runners and lifting it clear of the water until it was a rigid bar, its far end looped about a coral head a hundred and fifty

yards out in the lagoon. Waves swirled around the stern as the propeller began to churn the water. Slowly, with many protesting groans and a grating of plates, the *Constitution* slipped backward down the beach and floated freely out across the lagoon once again.

A chorus of relieved cheers echoed across the beach.

'Very neatly done,' Liz commended.

'Pascoe's the best skipper I ever had,' Grover confirmed.

He turned to the Doctor, Liz and Mike. 'It's good of you to agree to help like this, after what's happened.'

'My dear chap,' said the Doctor. 'We've been over all that.

For the moment let's concentrate on getting your missing people back. There isn't much time left, you know.'

'We're ready, Doctor.'

There was a hail from the bridge of the *Constitution*, now floating serenely a hundred yards off shore. Pascoe was shouting through a megaphone.

'We can see smoke coming from inland somewhere.'

They all backed down the beach to the water's edge to get a better view over the tree tops. A thin column of dark smoke could just be seen rising into the evening sky.

'I can't be certain,' said Mike, 'but I think that's coming from about the direction of the pit, isn't it?'

Liz saw dismay touch the Doctor's face.

'Of course, I should have realized!'

'What is it?'

'I'll explain as we go. Come on!'

He set off up the beach to the trees at a fast trot, and the others followed after him.

Private Davies, wearing a gas mask and standing amid the steam and smoke on the other side of the portal, could be seen listening to his

radio. He scribbled quickly on his pad, tore a sheet off and held it up ready. The Brigadier increased the power and Davis tossed the message through on to the lab floor, where Osgood picked it up and handed it to the Brigadier. Radio waves did not pass through the time bridge at much under full operating power, they had discovered, so the relay system had to be improvised.

'The men on the crater rim can see a ship in the lagoon now,' the Brigadier read. 'Say it must have been closer in to the shore and out of sight before now. That must have been where those lights were coming from.'

'Is it important, sir?' Osgood asked.

'Possibly, Osgood. If there are others on the island after all, that might explain where our people have been all this time.'

'You mean, held prisoner on it, sir?'

'If they were on board I doubt it was for a quick trip around the bay, do you, Corporal?' the Brigadier retorted. 'And you'd better get ready to assist in case we have to move the squad across and board her.'

'Er, can we intercept a ship at sea with this thing, sir?'

'I don't know, Osgood. But we'll soon find out!'

A messenger from the communications room entered with a new file of papers.

'Some more background material on the island from Canberra, sir. And a message from Geneva. But I think you'll want to see the other report first. It's from Germany.'

'So, these mirages have reached Europe, have they?'

'Yes, sir. Rather tragically, I'm afraid.'

'What? Let me see.'

Lethbridge-Stewart read the relevant report rapidly.

A commercial passenger jet, making its approach run to Munich less than an hour ago, had crashed. A hundred and twenty people were confirmed dead. Over the radio the airport control tower had heard the pilot speak about strange aircraft overhead, forcing him down and making it impossible to abort the landing. Ground radar confirmed

intermittent contacts, and suffered some interference. However, the pilot still should have been able to make a safe landing, except that the last thing they heard him say, just before the crash, was that the runway had shifted position.

Appended was a list of further UFO sightings, ghosts, and altered buildings in several large cities, but he only skimmed across them, while re-appraising the situation in his mind.

Until now the phenomena had seemed more of a curiosity: an abstract problem that might be an inconvenience, but manageable as long as people kept their heads. It had taken a tragedy to make him see the wider, frightening, possibilities.

Aircraft had proven vulnerable enough, but what if it spread to the roads? Maybe it already had, but the incidents had not yet been singled out from the usual accident reports. After all, the first sightings had only been reported a few hours ago, though it seemed longer. But if this was a sign of things to come, the chaos and loss of life could be astronomical, yet without any identifiable material cause. Was it actually a subtle prelude to an invasion? A worldwide softening up, so that at the height of the confusion an enemy could land almost unopposed?

Who? The cosmic intelligence behind the Yeti, the, Cybermen, the Nestene Consciousness...or some new horror from outer space?

The brief tropical twilight was already shading into night by the time they reached the pit. But there was no need to switch on their torches. The fire gave plenty of illumination.

It was a scene Liz would never forget.

The great tree which had lain across the edge of the pit had somehow been cut in half. Part was burning amid a patch of smoking grass, while a projecting spray of roots from the depths of the pit told where the rest had gone. Perhaps it had formed a makeshift ladder, now being rapidly consumed by the flames that licked around it and leapt twenty feet into the night. Silhouetted against the blaze was the giant figure she had seen that morning. Then it had seemed as immobile as any statue. Now it was very much alive and inhumanly animate. It was standing between the two burning halves of the tree, warming itself against their scorching heat as one might warm oneself against an open fire on a cold day. Held in one huge arm, extended just clear of the flames, was Nancy. She hung limply in its monstrous grasp, but

seemed otherwise unharmed. At its feet, working like a man possessed was Ferraro, tirelessly dragging fresh branches and deadwood from the surrounding forest to keep the fire fed.

'My God!' whispered Montgomery in awed tones. 'You were right, Doctor. It's alive.' Beside him, professional instinct caused Dodgeson automatically to reach for his camera on its strap before remembering he had not brought it with him.

'I should have realized it might have survived the freezing,' said the Doctor as though annoyed with himself.

'The relative temperature drop must have been just sufficient to induce suspended animation without inflicting permanent damage.'

Even as he spoke the giant seemed to sense their presence.

It turned to face them, and Liz realized its helmet visor was raised. From the recess within came a red, flickering glow, that teased her senses. She found herself wanting to stare deeper...

'Don't look at the eye!' the Doctor shouted commandingly.

The spell was broken abruptly, and they all cowered back a little, shielding their own eyes from the dreadful fascination of the alien orb.

'What in thunder's going on!' exclaimed Grover. 'And what does Ferraro think he's doing?'

'I'm afraid he's been hypnotized, as has your wife. Stay here and keep out of range. I'll see if I can have a chat and find out what this is all about.'

'Be careful, Doctor,' warned Mike.

'A quite unnecessary injunction, Sergeant,' the Doctor replied dryly.

He walked slowly out into the clearing, holding his hands up in what Liz hoped the alien would recognize as a friendly fashion. As he neared the towering figure, the eye pulsed directly at him even more fiercely. The Doctor stopped, clenched fists on hips, striking a patient but resolute posture.

'You're wasting your time, old chap. That trick won't work on me. Why don't you put the lady down, and we'll see if we can't sort something out peacefully, eh?'

A pale beam of red light sprang from the giant's eye and struck the Doctor full in the chest. He tumbled to one side, beating at his smouldering shirt front. Montgomery and Mike both automatically raised their guns, but the Doctor was on his feet again, waving at them to hold back. He turned once more to the giant, apparently undaunted.

'Now that wasn't very friendly, was it? I know you might be feeling a little confused right now, but you could at least make some effort to communicate.'

In response, the giant turned and thrust out the arm holding Nancy, so that she dangled over the still glowing pit. Its eye pulsed. Suddenly Nancy screamed. Liz saw Grover flinch in response and hold himself back with an effort. The giant withdrew his hand, but Nancy still hung dangerously near the edge. Her cries died away. The giant's eye pulsed again, the radiance washing over Nancy. She spoke out in a dull, halting voice, as though translating a soundless message that had nothing to do with her.

'He says you must help him...or else he will drop me into the pit. He must have more heat to allow him to return to his ship...in the crater of the volcano. Make a fire path to the crater for him to walk along. Also...the remaining two ampules must be returned at once. Do this...and when he is back inside his ship...he will release me.'

'Mrs Grover,' the Doctor called out. 'Can you hear me?'

'Yes,' she replied flatly.

'Can you communicate with our large friend here in return?'

'I can make signs and I know if he understands them. He makes pictures and...sort of feelings in my mind.'

'Then explain that it will take too long to lay a fire path because the volcano is going to explode in just a few hours, and I think that will be too hot even for his tastes. I will try to repair his heating unit if he will let me, but we have to send back to the ship for tools, and also the ampules, so he must be patient. Will you tell him that?'

'I will try.'

As Nancy began to gesture to the giant, all the while staring fixedly into its huge eye, the Doctor returned to the others and spoke quickly.

‘Liz, I want you to go back to the ship and fetch the best tools you can find for electro-mechanical repair work. They won’t be ideal, but with my sonic screwdriver I hope we can manage.’

‘But do you think this thing will keep its word?’ whispered Grover.

‘There’s no need to keep your voice down,’ the Doctor commented, nodding towards the giant. ‘He evolved in a thin trace atmosphere, so I think he’s relatively deaf, though probably sensitive to ground vibrations. As to his word, he probably doesn’t have any life-support facilities for humans on his ship, so he might as well let them go as he says.

Besides, we can hardly attempt to use violence against him while he’s holding Mrs Grover, can we?’

‘So we just give him what he wants, including the ampules,’ Grover said bitterly.

‘I think it’s the safest course.’

Grover nodded resignedly. ‘I guess I know it really. Even after what she’s done, I can’t risk him hurting Nancy. But Sternberg won’t like it.’

‘Which is something else for you to do, Liz. You’ve seen the ampules, so make sure Sternberg hands them over. In case he’s managed to get them open, check he hasn’t decanted any of the contents.’

‘I understand.’

Grover had pulled a slim notebook from his pocket and scribbled a brief message on it, which he tore out and handed to de Veer.

‘This’ll tell Pascoe to give you what you need. You and Dodgeson escort Doctor Shaw back to the ship. I better stay here in case…well, whatever.’

They nodded and the three turned to go.

‘Oh, Liz,’ the Doctor called out after them, ‘you’d better bring a ladder back with you as well.’

‘What on earth for?’

‘To reach our tall friend’s backpack of course. I doubt if we’ll be able to induce him to lie down.’

It had not been difficult to track down the location of the smoke source once night had fallen. The fire sent flickering shadows dancing through the trees for a couple of hundred yards around. Benton led his squad cautiously forward until they could see the occupants of the clearing. Then they stopped for several seconds to take in the improbable sight, gripping their weapons a little tighter as they did so. A giant figure standing in the middle of a bonfire holding a woman in one hand while a man worked at his feet to keep the blaze going. A little way off on the edge of the trees, a group of four men watched on. Two of them were reassuringly familiar.

'Follow me, lads,' Benton said softly. 'I know where we can get some answers.'

They skirted the clearing until they were close to the watching group. Benton gave a low whistle. Mike looked round, gave a surprised smile, and waved them on. The squad emerged from cover cautiously, keeping a wary eye on the fire-wreathed giant.

'The Brig's been getting worried about you two,' Benton said, by way of a greeting. 'There's something odd happening back home, Doc, and he wants you and Miss Shaw back there to work on it pronto.'

'I'm sure he does,' the Doctor agreed. 'But we do have a small problem of our own to deal with first.'

'So I can see. Would anybody mind telling me what's going on here? And is Miss Shaw okay?'

Mike introduced Grover and Montgomery and outlined the situation and Liz's whereabouts in a few creditably brief and concise sentences. Benton shook his head in dismay. 'I dunno, Doc. Why do these weird things pop up when you start poking your nose into other people's business?' He radioed Millar on the crater rim and passed on the news of their qualified success in locating the missing personnel for relay back to the lab. 'In two minutes you're going to get a rocket from the Brig,' he predicted.

'Well before that, I need some information,' the Doctor replied, taking the radio from Benton and walking a few steps away from the others before speaking urgently into it in a low voice.

'What's he being so cagey about?' Benton wondered.

Mike glanced at Grover and Montgomery, and lowered his own voice. 'Just checking on a bit of history, I think.'

There was no response for three or four minutes, then the Doctor held the radio close again, and Benton saw an expression of relief cross his features.

‘Okay?’ asked Mike, as he handed the device back to Benton.

‘The Brigadier has found a copy of a newspaper cutting from Canberra, stating plainly that Grover’s party witnessed a volcanic explosion and tidal wave in this area, but the only casualties listed were those crewmen we know have already died,’ the Doctor reported. ‘Gratifyingly, there is no mention of giants or time travellers.’

‘And it looks like the ampules are going back to their owner,’ Mike observed, ‘which ties up that loose end.’

‘Time can be very tidy when it wants to,’ commented the Doctor.

‘What are you two on about?’ asked Benton.

‘Well you see –’ began Mike, then froze. ‘Hold on, I think I can hear something coming.’

With a whir and swish of bushes, Benton saw a small tank-like vehicle with a globular body appear out of the trees about twenty yards away. Its camera turret swivelled round to focus on the giant.

‘This is going to complicate matters, somewhat,’ said the Doctor gravely.

The giant had turned to face the tank, as a mechanical arm started to unfold from its forward unit. Before it could be deployed, a narrow beam of light lashed from the giant’s eye.

A spot of metal on the globe became cherry red in seconds.

‘Get down!’ yelled Mike.

They fell flat as the globe burst apart with a sharp bang, momentarily filling the clearing with a shower of water droplets and whining fragments of shrapnel.

Benton lifted his head cautiously. ‘What was all that about?’

‘That was the latest round in an unusually protracted dispute we’ve inadvertently become involved with,’

commented the Doctor.

‘And the stakes have just been raised,’ added Mike.

Ferraro had returned to his fire building as though nothing had happened, but Nancy Grover called out to them.

‘He says you must protect him from any more of those things until he returns to his craft...or else he will kill me.’

‘Seems to me he can protect himself pretty well without our help,’ observed Benton.

‘His internal energy levels must still be pretty low,’

explained the Doctor. ‘Projecting a beam like that must consume a lot of power, and while he’s dependent on purely external chemical reactions for his supply, he dare not do it too often.’

‘We’ve got no choice, have we?’ said Grover. He turned to Mike. ‘Sergeant, can your men deal with those tanks?’

‘We’ll do our best, Mr Grover,’ Mike promised. He glanced at Benton, who nodded. ‘Okay, let’s get a perimeter established.’

The UNIT soldiers had hardly taken up their positions before another tank could be heard approaching through the forest.

‘Let me try to talk to them first,’ said the Doctor, striding forward. ‘I might be able to prevent further violence.’

‘Suits me, Doc,’ said Benton with some feeling. ‘But how do you speak to a fish in a motorized goldfish bowl?’

‘The Semquess have a language of tentacle movements as well as one utilizing waterborne sounds. I can’t mimic their vocal range, and haven’t really got the right number of arms for the other, but I hope I can manage a pidgin version.’

‘All right, Doctor, have a go,’ Mike agreed. ‘But if it turns nasty, get out of the line of fire fast!’

Even as the tank appeared between the trees, the Doctor passed through the line of crouching soldiers, waving his arms about to attract its attention. It halted and the camera turret turned to focus on him.

At least he’s got it interested, thought Benton.

For a minute the Doctor went through a series of almost comic contortions, adding the occasional kick and shake of a leg to his intricate, stylized arm movements. A pair of mechanical arms unfolded from the front of the machine and began to gesture back. The Doctor responded, and an odd sort of dialogue began. Benton exchanged a hopeful glance with Mike Yates. Perhaps they might be able to work things out sensibly after all. Then the arms of the tank abruptly crossed in a sharp, negative manner. The Doctor stepped closer, as though to add emphasis to his own signs, and one arm suddenly swung out, catching him hard across the ribs and knocking him to the ground.

I know what that gesture means in any language, thought Benton angrily, and fired a burst of automatic fire at the tank.

The tank rolled forward again, a new arm unfolding from the front compartment resembling a coiled whip. The rest of the squad joined in, and bullets ricocheted and whined away into the darkness. Even Montgomery blazed away with his hunting rifle. The whip suddenly uncoiled in a blur of motion, extending thirty feet and brushing the shoulder of one of the soldiers. There was a crackle of electricity and the man fell twitching to the ground.

'Doctor! Get clear!' shouted Mike Yates. They saw the Doctor wriggle aside on knees and elbows and then Mike threw a grenade. It exploded under the tank, causing it to veer sideways, but failing to crack the pressure hull. Benton tossed another grenade. He had better luck as it lodged between the front unit and the sphere. One of the mechanical arms twisted round, frantically scrabbling after it. Too late! The grenade went off, splitting the hull open. Fragments of the sphere flew about the clearing and a light shower of dank, cold water pattered down over them. Then all was quiet again.

Mike Yates immediately ran over to the soldier who had been struck by the electric whip. He was curled up and trembling violently, but at least was still alive. Benton crossed to the Doctor and helped him to his feet.

'You okay, Doc? You didn't make a rude sign by accident, did you?'

'I was the soul of tact and diplomacy, Sergeant,' the Doctor assured him, brushing the dirt off his trousers. 'But the Semquess are simply a most obstinate and single-minded race.

They want the remaining ampules returned, and Brokk – that's the

name of the giant by the way – punished for stealing them.

And they don't care who gets hurt in the process.'

'So there'll be reinforcements along soon, you think?'

'Most likely. They're bound to have communicated this location to their base. We must just hope Liz gets back from the yacht with the tools and ampules as soon as possible.'

Benton gave a start. 'But Doc, what happens if she meets up with more of these tanks along the way?'

Sixteen

he launch grated on the sand. Wallace and his companion, left o

T n beach guard, helped to pull it clear of the shallow waves. Liz noticed that they seemed agitated.

'What's the matter?' she asked.

'Can't be sure, ma'am,' replied Wallace. 'But we heard some shooting out in the forest a few minutes ago. And a couple of bangs that could have been dynamite.'

'From the direction of the pit?'

'Maybe. Like I say, we can't be sure.'

Liz frowned, listening. All seemed quiet now. What could have happened? Well, they would just have to get back there as soon as possible and see for themselves. Dodgeson jumped out on to the wet tide-line and courteously helped her down.

She noticed in passing that he now had his still camera and a separate flashgun unit slung about his neck. De Veer and a couple of sailors followed, carrying lanterns, tools and the incongruous ladder. The rear was brought up by Sternberg.

His pockets bulged with the two remaining ampules, and he had his hands thrust down over them, as though expecting that at any moment Liz would try to take them by force.

'I absolutely refuse,' he said once again, as he stomped ashore, 'to hand these over without the direct order of Mr Grover. I want to hear it with my own ears, you understand?'

‘I’m not arguing with you any more, Professor.’ Liz sighed. ‘Come along and find out for yourself. When you see that giant holding Mrs Grover hostage, you’ll understand why we’ve got to give them back.’

‘But the loss to science! The magnificent possibilities!’ Liz suspected it was more his personal loss that he was bemoaning, but she didn’t press the point.

‘I sympathize, Professor, really I do. But sometimes –’

‘Hey what’s that?’ One of the sailors was pointing along the beach, shining his torch. His companion raised his rifle nervously, obviously expecting it was the giant crabs returning. Instead, a globular form rolled smoothly up the beach with a soft whir, shedding water from its caterpillar track underbody.

‘Another sea tank!’ Liz exclaimed.

‘There’s one over here, too,’ de Veer exclaimed, pointing to the other side of them where a second vehicle was emerging from the waves. As they turned about uneasily the water began to swell right beside the launch as a third spherical body broke the surface.

‘Everybody back away slowly,’ Wallace shouted. Liz obeyed with the others, thinking uncomfortably that they must have passed right over the things rolling along the floor of the lagoon on the way in.

Now five of the vehicles had surged up the beach. Their forward units opened and arms like coiled whips emerged.

The motors whirred again and they started towards them. The sailors pointed their rifles defiantly in response. The Doctor’s advice of the previous night drifted through her mind: ‘Don’t be too proud to run away.’

‘Run!’ she shouted.

The whips cracked out. Electric sparks danced along their lengths. Wallace and the other sailor fell in contorted heaps.

Dodgeson fired his rifle inexpertly and missed, then he joined the others in flight.

Finding their way by the dancing light of the lanterns, they crashed through the screen of palms and on to the path that wound between the great trees. Behind them came the steady, remorseless whir of the

pursuing tanks. They were not travelling quite as fast as they could run, but then machines would not get tired. They pounded onward, casting anxious glances to the rear. Liz realized that by heading for the pit they were only bringing trouble with them, but there seemed nowhere else to go.

After a few minutes, Dodgeson was gasping heavily and falling behind. His thin, gangling frame was not suited for this sort of activity. De Veer caught him under the arm.

'Come on, Hubert!' he panted encouragingly. 'Chuck your camera – it's holding you back!'

'Never!' Dodgeson replied with spirit. But he was now tottering. De Veer called out to the others:

'Go on! We'll try to slow them down. Lead them away somewhere.'

Liz was terrified that she would never see the two again, even though what they were doing made sense. She slowed down enough to take the spare lantern from de Veer. 'Take care,' she shouted, and she, Sternberg and the two sailors with the tools and ladder stumbled on. As they turned the next bend in the path they heard a ragged volley of rifle fire from behind them. It made her want to run faster, so that she would be out of earshot before the rifles fell silent.

Suddenly there were torch lights ahead of them, and Liz heard someone calling her name. It was Mike Yates. As they approached she saw in the dappled moonlight that he was leading half a dozen UNIT soldiers, and the uniforms had never seemed such a welcome sight before.

'Back there...' she panted, pointing, 'Dodgeson and de Veer...fighting sea tanks.'

'We guessed you might have met more of them,' Mike said crisply. 'You get along to the pit. We'll deal with this.' And he led his squad on at a steady run, heading for the sounds of sporadic gunfire.

Wearily, Liz, Sternberg and the two sailors plodded on.

Five minutes later red firelight pierced the trees and they stumbled into the clearing, dominated by the giant as before.

As they did so, Benton sprang out from the cover of a tree and ran anxiously forward.

‘Are you all right, Doctor Shaw?’

‘I hope so,’ she panted. ‘Perhaps the cavalry could arrange to arrive a little sooner next time.’

‘We’ll do our best,’ he promised with a grin.

The two sailors had dropped the tool bag and the short ladder with relief, and were recovering their breath while goggling at the giant, as was Sternberg. Grover, Montgomery and the Doctor clustered round them.

‘What are you doing here?’ Grover demanded of Sternberg.

‘And where are de Veer and Dodgeson?’

‘They stayed back, trying to slow the sea tanks down,’ Liz explained.

‘Bully for them!’ Montgomery exclaimed.

‘Sergeant Yates and the soldiers went to help. I just hope they’re in time.’

‘I’m sure they will be, Liz,’ the Doctor assured her, head bent over the tool bag, checking the contents. ‘Good, we should be able to manage with these. Now, when you’ve got your breath back, we’ve got a repair job to do. And the sooner the better.’

Mike headed for the sounds of battle echoing between the looming trees. The shooting was already trailing off. How much ammo had the two got with them, he wondered? There came the first crackles of the tank’s electric whips. A coldness struck at the pit of his stomach. Hell! They were too late!

Then an unexpected blaze of white light starkly illuminated the trees ahead of them before winking out, temporarily banishing the moonlit shadows. What was that? The tanks’

whirring motors became audible. There was another soundless burst of brilliance, and a flurry of crackling electricity.

Suddenly they rounded the spreading roots of a huge tree and almost fell over Dodgeson and de Veer, both very much alive, sheltering in its hollows. Before them was a semi-circle of five tanks zig-zagging about in apparent. confusion, colliding with tree trunks and each other. Their whips were lashing out at random, more often hitting another

tank than anything else.

Even as they took in the odd scene, Dodgeson rapidly changed the bulb in the reflector of his flashgun and fired it at the tanks again, illuminating the scene with eye-searing brilliance.

‘Grenades,’ ordered Mike, blinking purple spots from his vision.

Under the subsequent hail of explosives, two tanks were totally destroyed when their pressure spheres burst. One clanked away with a grating of twisted track links, and the other two retreated unsteadily back towards the sea. As the last sounds of their engines faded away, Mike turned to the two film makers, only to find them trembling from nervous exhaustion and a mutual fit of hysterical laughter.

‘I tell you, Montgomery couldn’t have done anything finer at his swashbuckling best,’ de Veer choked out, wiping his eyes. ‘There we were, cornered and out of ammunition, having done the heroic self-sacrifice bit, and Hubert says “at least I’m going to get a good picture of them before we go”, and pops one off.’

‘Well there was nothing else left do do,’ said Dodgeson defensively.

‘Am I criticizing? Anyway, suddenly they’re all over the place, as though they can’t see straight anymore.’

‘If their drivers come from the bottom of the ocean, they can’t be used to bright light,’ said Mike. ‘Your flash probably overloaded their filters.’

‘Whatever you say, Sergeant.’ He shook his head. ‘And I wanted him to throw his camera away!’ He stood up and helped Dodgeson to his feet. Suddenly the cameraman gave an anguished groan.

‘Oh no! I forgot to take the lens cap off!’

Benton, patrolling the perimeter of the clearing, looked around once more at the strange scene, shaking his head. This was all getting decidedly weird. He wasn’t sure how he would ever explain it to the Brigadier.

The giant was standing by the pit with the fire warming his feet, Nancy Grover still clutched in his hand. Ferraro continued to feed the fire, but worked like a zombie now.

They dare not interrupt him for fear of annoying Brokk, though he

was obviously close to collapse from sheer exhaustion. This was one of the factors spurring the Doctor on. The ladder from the yacht was now propped up against the giant's back with the Doctor half way up it, one long leg hooked through the rungs, working intently on its life-support pack. From the foot of the ladder Liz Shaw handed up tools and occasionally got into technical arguments with him. To one side, Montgomery was having a quiet smoke in between taking nips from his hip flask. Farley, the soldier struck by the electric whip, was lying down under a tree, still weak and trembling and lucky to be alive. The shoulder of his uniform had been burned through to the skin. On the edge of the clearing, Grover and Sternberg were arguing. The words drifted over to Benton as their tempers rose.

'As soon as the Doctor is finished, you will hand over the ampules,' Grover said flatly.

'We can say they were lost, or destroyed,' Sternberg hissed back. 'How can it tell otherwise?'

'Because the Doctor already promised to return them.'

'The Doctor! Always now it is the Doctor! Has his word suddenly become law?'

'No, but he does talk a lot of sense. Maybe I should have listened to him earlier.'

'We had a dream, remember? To make your daughter, and thousands like her, whole again. If we keep our nerve now, that can still be realized.'

'Look how many good men have already died chasing that dream.'

'Ach, most regrettable, naturally. But there are always sacrifices to be made for the sake of progress –'

'And Nancy, while she remains my wife, will not be another of them! You will hand those ampules over, Professor

– or shall I have them taken from you by force?'

Sternberg sagged, muttering under his breath. 'Enough!

Have it your way.' He pulled the ampules from his pockets and almost threw them at Grover, then stalked away. Grover shook his head sadly at the scientist's retreating back.

A couple of minutes later, to Benton's relief, Mike and the squad returned with Dodgeson and de Veer apparently safe and well. Grover and Montgomery welcomed them back warmly. Even as they were telling their story, the Doctor snapped closed a panel in the giant's life-support pack.

'It's finished,' he announced loudly, sliding back down the ladder to the ground.

All watched anxiously as the huge figure moved experimentally away from the fire, checking a display panel on its forearm. He saw Grover holding the ampules and pointed commandingly. His eye pulsed.

'He wants them now. And where is the case?' Nancy Grover translated.

'Uh...back on the yacht...It was forgotten. Does it matter?'

'No. Bring them as they are.'

Grover stepped forward. Brokk, holding Nancy like a rag doll, reached out with her and she mechanically took the ampules from her husband. With the other hand Brokk opened the flap of his belt pouch, and Nancy placed them carefully inside.

'Please, let her go now,' Grover called out.

'When he has reached his ship,' Nancy replied.

'At least let this poor man free of your control,' the Doctor pleaded, pointing at Ferraro.

'He has no need of him now,' Nancy conceded.

The giant's eye pulsed. Ferraro sank to his knees, looked around him in a daze as though waking from a dream, then toppled forward on to his face. Liz was beside him in an instant together with Mike Yates, already pulling out his emergency medical pack. Liz took a hypodermic from it and started filling it, momentarily oblivious to her surroundings as her professional instincts took over.

Brokk seemed to watch their activities curiously for a moment, then turned away, striding off between the trees and vanishing from sight, leaving a sudden void in the clearing that his presence had dominated. For a minute, the steady thump of his feet could be heard, then they faded away.

Mike looked around at the others, finally fixing on the Doctor.

‘Well, what do we do now?’

‘We follow at a discreet distance, of course. And hope the Semquess don’t interfere again before he reaches his ship.

Perhaps you’d better warn your men at the crater that he’s coming and to keep out of his way.’

Benton pulled out his radio and called up Millar. ‘Listen, don’t worry, but you’ve got a very large visitor heading your way...’

‘I’m sorry, Miss Amelia, but I haven’t got the men to spare anymore.’ Captain Pascoe looked tired but determined. ‘If this ship is to be ready to sail before the deadline, that’s how it’s got to be.’

‘But surely –’

‘No. Not after losing the beach guards as well. We’ll watch for signals, but I’d have a mutiny on my hands if I ordered another sailor to step on that island. They think the place is jinxed, and I can’t say that I blame them.’

‘Then I’ll go myself.’

‘Your father was quite clear about that, Miss Amelia. You stay here.’ He ran his fingers through his greying hair. ‘I’ve got to think of the ship now. God knows, your father’s a friend as well as my boss, but he’d understand. He and the others knew the risk. We wait. That’s all we can do.’

A little while later, Amelia leant on the rail and stared out across the glittering waters to the dark bulk of the island.

Since the loss of the beach guards and the disappearance of Doctor Shaw’s party, they had heard occasional gunfire and intermittent explosions from inland. Was it the sea tanks or the giant they were fighting? Had they rescued Nancy and Mr Ferraro? Was her father safe? All it needed now, she thought, was for the shrieking bats to start up again and the crabs to appear to make it an utter nightmare. Thankfully there was no sign of them. Perhaps they were keeping out of sight, having learnt their lesson. Or perhaps their natural instincts told them that more dangerous creatures than themselves stalked the island that night. Amelia shivered, but not from the coolness of the air. She felt the pall of gloom and fear settle lower over the ship,

causing the men on watch to grip their rifles more tightly and count the minutes until their departure. She held her crucifix and gave up a prayer for the safe return of all those presently out there in the darkness.

Amelia suddenly found Miss Ellis by her side, having arrived in her usual quiet way. To her surprise, she was offering her a glass of brandy.

'Miss Ellis, you know I don't –'

'Tonight you need it, my dear,' she said, gently but firmly.

'You've been through so much, and waiting can be a terrible time. I know, believe me. I waited during the war for...Well, never mind. I've had a drink already, and I suggest you keep me company. Please.'

Amelia hesitated, then took a sip. She coughed slightly, but the spirit did warm her.

'Remember,' Miss Ellis added softly, 'I worked for your father before you were born. How do you think I feel right now?'

Amelia reached out and squeezed her hand.

A waver in the mirage-like haze cloaking the island drew her attention. It was flickering more erratically even than it had seemed to on the first night, and at times it faded right away, as though close to total dissolution. It was almost as though it were dying. She looked out across the ocean with a sudden acute sense of the inevitable mortality of all things.

Soon Salutua would no longer be a lost island. If the volcano erupted as predicted, it would simply no longer exist.

Suddenly she gripped Miss Ellis's arm hard.

'Look! Out there beyond the reef.'

There was an upwelling in the ocean halfway to the horizon. Spray glittered in the moonlight and phosphorescent ripples shimmered through the disturbed waters. A huge grey globe, perhaps four hundred feet across, broke the surface and rose slowly and silently into the starry night sky.

Seventeen

hey're expecting a *what* to arrive shortly?' the Brigadie

'T

r exclaimed.

'A giant, sir,' replied Osgood, holding out the latest message relayed from Davies. 'The alien in the forest that Sergeant Benton reported earlier is quite large, apparently.'

'Really. And what's it doing making for the volcano?'

'It's the pilot of the spaceship they found in the crater, sir,'

Osgood revealed, reading on. 'It wants to get back to its craft and take off as soon as possible. It's carrying a woman hostage with it.'

'Good grief!'

'But the Doctor is sure she will be freed unharmed if the, er, giant is left alone.'

'I should hope so. Well, I suppose we must be grateful that it seems intent on leaving promptly rather than hanging around to cause any more mischief,' commented the Brigadier with some acerbity. 'All right, tell Davies to observe but not to get involved.' He glanced at his watch. 'And remind him to be alert for any change in the volcano. There's only two hours left. He's to be brought back through the moment it shows any sign of increased activity, and we'll have to initiate the alternate retrieval plan for the others.'

'Yes, sir.'

Bell entered the lab.

'Thought you ought to know, sir. The disturbances, whatever they are, have reached us now.'

Lethbridge-Stewart sighed. 'I suppose it was inevitable, though we seem to have been lucky so far. Give me the reports.'

'You can see it on television, sir. All the main channels are putting out special bulletins. Actually, they're now getting the news in faster than government sources.'

'Typical! All right, is that set in the corner working?'

It was a rather battered trolley mounted model, which the Doctor appeared to have modified at some time in the past for one of his experiments. However it still performed its more mundane functions adequately, and the image of a newsreader appeared as soon as it was switched on. He was evidently beginning a roundup of events for viewers who had just tuned in. Sheets of paper were scattered untidily across the desk before him as he tried to keep up with the latest developments, clearly improvising links as he went.

'It is now just...er, a little over eighteen hours since the first sightings of so-called unidentified flying objects were reported on the West Coast of America. With them came a rash of other peculiar incidents...' A montage of film clips flashed across the screen beside the newreader's head, showing UFOs, interviews with excited or frightened people and blurred pictures of buildings and ghostly figures. 'Since then, the wave of similar sightings combined with further, apparently "supernatural" activity, has spread steadily across the globe, bringing with it a growing sense of panic and confusion. Many accidents, including some fatalities, have been reported, supposedly caused by mysterious apparitions...'

Images of crashed cars and burning houses flicked across the screen. 'Riots sparked off by these incidents have occurred in several cities. No scientific explanation for the phenomena has been forthcoming, and some of the more extreme religious cults have claimed that these are signs of the end of the world, or Judgement Day. But all the major religious leaders are calling for calm, as are national governments. A special session of the United Nations has been convened. Until now, Britain seemed to have been spared, but within the last few hours the phenomena reached our shores. UFOs have been sighted over several parts of the country, and with them other mysterious happenings. For our first report, we go to Lyn Murray in Portsmouth.'

The scene shifted to show the reporter standing in a road lit by the orange hue of street lamps and the reflections of flashing blue lights. Behind her was the usual crowd of curious onlookers, while beyond them were the tapes of a police cordon. Lyn Murray looked earnest but slightly breathless.

'About a hundred yards down the road from where I'm standing is the church of St Barnabas. It was built in the nineteen fifties to replace the original building destroyed in the war. But two hours ago, the entire building, together with its adjoining hall and social centre, apparently vanished to be replaced by, what appears to be, a ghostly replica of the original old church and spire...'

The camera zoomed in over her shoulder to focus on a shimmering spire, twinkling against the night sky. The body of the church below was palely visible, suffused by a red glow from its windows.

'Older residents of the area confirm that it is the exact likeness of the original church, and claim to have seen people entering the building as though for a service. Police are keeping the road sealed for the moment pending further investigation, and are making no comment at this stage. So far they are also making no comment about the apparent disappearance of the local vicar, the Reverend Timothy Andrew Knox, who was last seen in the new church hall shortly before the...er, replica church appeared.'

The studio newsreader's voice cut in.

'That's an extraordinary story, Lyn. And I understand there have been other similar incidents locally?'

'Yes, John. We have heard unconfirmed reports of unknown ships being sighted in the harbour of the naval dockyard just a few miles away. Buildings there are also said to have changed, though this has not been officially confirmed.' Lyn Murray's face paled under the artificial lights and her composure seemed to slip a little. She took a deep breath then pressed on. 'However, we ourselves personally witnessed what I can only describe as an apparition on our way here. We were driving past the end of Queen Street, which runs close to the dockyard, and there appeared to be...well, a parade of ghosts marching along the street in regular lines.' She seemed embarrassed at what she had said and hurried on. 'Many other people saw them as well, and indeed there were several minor accidents as a result of cars swerving to avoid the figures...'

A recorded sequence was cut in: a shaky image showing a jumble of cars scattered across the roadway, some having crashed into railings, others with interlocked bumpers. A number of people stood on the pavements, staring about in confusion, while others were running away in apparent panic.

The camera swung around and tried to focus. Along the street, passing through the stalled vehicles like wraiths, were indeed fleeting images of marching figures, carrying what might have been banners. There was an impression of uniformity of dress, reminding Lethbridge-Stewart of a military parade. Then the ghostly images wavered and faded from sight, leaving the camera panning up and down the street, recording only the startled faces of the onlookers.

‘As you can see,’ Lyn Murray’s strained voice continued over the pictures, ‘we tried to film them, but the images were blurred and did not come out very clearly. Since recording that, we have heard of similar apparitions being seen in Guildhall Square, which lies in the direction those figures were moving. Whether the two sightings are connected we cannot be sure. All I can say is, speaking personally, that there was an undeniable sense of *something* being present that is impossible to convey in words.’ She took another deep breath.

‘And also that it was the most frightening thing I’d ever seen!’

The studio newsreader cut in quickly. ‘Thank you, Lyn.

And…er, for our next report we go to –’

‘That’s enough, turn it off,’ the Brigadier said to Bell. ‘You are recording all this?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Well keep doing so and add the tapes to the other reports.

Let me know if something unusual happens. That is, more unusual than what we’ve already seen.’

The men went back to their duties, but Lethbridge-Stewart could sense the change in mood. The problem was coming too close to home for comfort. But why had it taken so long? It had reached Europe hours ago. Was it carried by something that had only just arrived here, or had Britain some sort of immunity that had resisted the advance? Of course, he always privately thought Britain was special: the finest country in the world and the most sensible people. Was innate level-headedness a factor? No, that was hardly possible. These apparitions could be recorded on camera, if only fleetingly.

They existed. Then what was the key? What?

The phone rang. It was Major General Scobie, UNIT’s regular army liaison.

‘Yes, sir,’ the Brigadier confirmed, ‘we are investigating…Exactly, getting too close for comfort now…Glad to know we can call on the regulars when we need them…What? Yes, the Doctor did do splendidly against the Autons, didn’t he…And that nice Miss Shaw, yes…I am getting them to work on it, sir, but they’ve, er, been out of the country and still have a little way to go on their return

journey...Well nearly twelve thousand miles and forty years if you must know!'

Brokk paused as the trees began to thin about the lower slopes of the volcano. His electro-static sense had registered a disturbance. He scanned the skies apprehensively, adjusting the visual range for maximum receptivity. Yes, there it was, as he feared. A Semquess globeship, much larger than the one he had destroyed all those years before. At the moment it was over the sea, but it was steadily spiralling closer. With his cloaking field failing, it was inevitable that they should have detected his hiding place eventually, but he had hoped for a little more time. Shortly they would locate his ship in the crater and that would be the end, for a vessel of that size would totally outclass him. What bitter irony! A few dex, a few centidex later, and he would have been safely gone. No, that was not true. They had clearly waited all these years, monitoring the planet for any sign of him. Even if he had been revived earlier they would have detected his take-off and intercepted him before he could make the jump into hyperspace. Now he would simply never be allowed to leave the planet's atmosphere. How he had underestimated their tenacity and patience! But what could he do? He looked at the native female thrall who still hung placidly in his grasp. She would be no protection from the Semquess. Even if he used her as a lever with her own kind again, their weapons would be useless against the globeship.

It was not in his nature to give up easily, but the Grold were a pragmatic race. Brokk recognized the stark truth. The Semquess would never rest now until they saw him die.

Liz felt she had spent entirely too many of the last 24 hours tramping back and forth through the forest of Salutua.

Hopefully this would be the last time. At least Brokk's trail was easy to follow and, though they expected it at any moment, there had been no interference from the island's native giant fauna. They had probably been scared away from the path by the alien's passage. Or so she hoped. The trail still had its hazards, however.

'Remind me again,' she asked the Doctor reproachfully, after he had carelessly let another low branch swing back in her face for the third time. 'Why we are marching towards a volcano due to explode in a couple of hours?'

'Can't leave Nancy to find her own way home,' interjected Montgomery, panting but still pressing gamely on. 'Even after her

performance this morning, it's just not done.'

'I know that,' said Liz. 'I mean now we're in radio contact, why can't the soldiers at the crater collect Nancy once she's free, bring her back here through the time bridge, then pick us up afterwards?'

The Doctor answered her brightly.

'There's plenty of time for the others to return to the yacht with Mrs Grover if they don't dawdle, and it would be simpler for us to return through the portal where it is – save the Brigadier the fuss of moving it. Then we can get on with examining these strange sightings being reported. Did Benton tell you about the latest ones?'

'Doctor,' Liz said suspiciously, 'what aren't you telling me?'

The Doctor sighed. 'According to Benton, the precision of the portal manoeuvring controls still leaves something to be desired.'

'I thought going back up to full power solved that?'

'Not entirely, it seems.'

'Then what did the Brigadier plan to do if he couldn't hold it steady enough to pick us up beyond the crater?'

Benton spoke up. 'Drop a message to say head for the beach. He's sure he can hit that. Well, somewhere along it, anyway.'

'But there must be almost five miles of beach fronting the lagoon. Just how good is the manoeuvring control now?'

'The Brig's been doing very well with it,' Benton said loyally.

'Exactly how well?' Liz probed remorselessly.

In the flickering torchlight Benton looked uncomfortable.

'He has got it to go up and down pretty smoothly.'

'Oh wonderful!' Liz retorted.

'But the further away from the crater, the worse the steering seems to get.'

'But why on earth should that be?'

‘Search me, Miss.’

‘Of course.’ The Doctor suddenly sounded jubilant. ‘I should have realized! The space–time location of the portal is continually being stabilized by the omicron radiation trace it followed back here. Which means it’s only fully controllable in the vicinity of Brokk’s ship or directly above it.’

‘Well I suppose that makes sense,’ Liz agreed, then frowned. ‘Hold on. The radiation trace emanates from a piece of the ship found in the future, right? But the ship is still intact at the moment and Brokk is going leave in it anytime now.

That means it’s going to be destroyed here soon, because it already *has* been from our point of view – perhaps when the volcano goes up!’

‘I wondered when you’d see that probability,’ said the Doctor, with a smile. ‘And you’re absolutely correct, Liz.

Time and causality demand it. They’re always quite inflexible in such cases. Well, almost always.’

Liz lowered her voice so that Grover, pressing on ahead of them, would not hear. ‘But will Nancy be freed in time?’

‘According to the Brigadier’s report, she must be.’

‘Hallo,’ said Mike, raising his field glasses, ‘I can see him, but not Mrs Grover.’

They had reached the lower slopes of the volcano and the trees were thinning. Between them a moonlit stretch of hillside and a section of crater rim was visible. Perhaps a quarter of a mile away, the huge figure of Brokk could be seen slowly plodding up towards the summit.

‘I’m sure of it,’ confirmed Mike. ‘Both his hands are empty.’

‘What’s he done with her?’ Grover exclaimed anxiously.

‘He must have just put her down,’ de Veer said reassuringly. ‘He realized he didn’t need her anymore and wanted all his strength for climbing.’

‘Then we can now intercept him!’ Sternberg began.

‘Recover the ampules…’

‘Forget it, Professor,’ Grover said firmly. ‘That’s done with. We find Nancy and get out of here.’ He began swinging his torch around, calling out her name. The others joined in.

‘Spread out,’ ordered Mike. ‘She can’t be far.’

Even as he spoke, a faint, uncertain voice drifted out of the darkness: ‘I…I’m over here…’

They followed the sound. A bewildered and bedraggled looking Nancy was clinging to the branches in the fork of a tree, fifteen feet off the ground. A UNIT soldier climbed up on the shoulders of his comrades and the dazed actress was gently helped down.

The Doctor looked at her intently in the torchlight. ‘Are you all right now, Mrs Grover?’

‘Yes. thank you. He just dropped me in the tree…I’m quite myself again.’ She bit her lip. ‘I remember everything.’

There was an awkward pause. Grover looked at her with both relief and disappointment. Nancy hung her head. What a change from the angry self-centred figure she had presented just a few hours before, thought Liz. A shock can sometimes work wonders.

‘Thank you for coming after me,’ Nancy continued in muted tones. ‘I know I don’t deserve it. I’m sorry for everything. If it hadn’t been for my interfering…Mr Ferraro…is he all right?’

‘He’s exhausted, but he should recover,’ Liz explained.

‘They took him back to the yacht.’

‘Please don’t blame him. He was only doing it for me. I thought the eye might be valuable, you see…’ She looked at Sternberg. ‘It was really fine what you were trying to do for Amelia, Professor. And I’ve lost it all for you –’

Millar’s voice spoke out of Benton’s radio. He listened for a moment, then said aloud: ‘They’ve seen something in the air. They think it’s another spaceship.’

Everybody craned their necks, peering up at the sky. Mike suddenly said: ‘There it is.’

For a moment Liz could not see what he was pointing at.

Then she realized that a dark globe was occluding the stars, reflecting a slowly waxing and waning crescent of moonlight as it circled the island.

'The Semquesss bringing up the big guns, I suppose,' Mike ventured.

'Certainly looks like they're getting ready for a showdown,' said Benton.

'Of course,' the Doctor said half to himself, then spoke rapidly to Grover. 'Things are happening faster than we thought. I suggest your people start back to the yacht immediately. Don't worry about meeting any more sea tanks –

the survivors must have been picked up already by the mother craft. You want to be as far away from here as possible before the eruption.'

'Right. Come on, let's get going, everybody. Doctor, you're sure you can get away through this time bridge of yours safely? Won't that thing interfere with your plans?'

The Doctor was now looking buoyantly confident. 'Not at all. In fact I believe it will help solve certain technical problems for us very shortly. Don't worry. Goodbye.'

'Goodbye – and thanks.'

'Say goodbye to Amelia for us,' said Mike.

Grover, de Veer and Dodgeson set off briskly.

Montgomery gave her an ironic wave of farewell which caused Liz to smile. Sternberg and Nancy followed close behind, the latter still apologizing for the loss of the ampules.

Liz wondered fleetingly if some good might have come out of it for one person at least, but she rapidly put such speculation from her mind. They had more pressing concerns.

'Just what did you mean by that last remark, Doctor?' she began, then realized Benton was back on the radio to Millar.

'The Doctor says to withdraw everybody back through the portal *now*. Inform the Brigadier he is to wait until eruption begins, then pick us up half a mile from crater on edge of forest, bearing...' Mike held out his luminous compass for him to see. 'Bearing two one zero degrees.

He should find portal control has improved by then. Get moving! Benton out.' He telescoped down the radio aerial. 'You'd better be right about this, Doc.'

'Right about what?' Liz asked again.

The Doctor smiled. 'Everything is working out as it should be, Liz. We always knew what was going to happen, you see, but not why. I was beginning to wonder about the lack of any preliminary signs of an eruption. Well now I don't think there'll be any, because it was never a natural event in the first place.'

'Oh...I'm beginning to understand now.'

The distant plodding shape of Brokk was nearing the crater summit.

'You mean his craft blows up, or is destroyed by the Semquess ship and triggers the eruption?' interpreted Mike.

'Something like that, yes.'

'But how does that help us with the problem of controlling the portal? The end result's the same either way. I don't want to spend my last moments hopping over lava flows while the Brig tries to find us with dodgy steering.'

'Ah, but consider what the consequences of the initial explosion will be, Sergeant. Remember where the original fragment of his craft was found...'

Understanding dawned. The atmosphere eased slightly.

Benton nodded towards the giant figure and the circling globe.

'Surely he knows they're up there waiting for him?'

'Probably. Once he reaches his craft he may try communicating with them – bargaining his life for the remaining ampules. But I rather suspect he is going to fight.

I'm not familiar with his race personally, but I think it is all or nothing with them.'

'Whatever he does, we know how it's going to end, don't we?' said Mike, funereally.

Brokk passed over the crater rim and disappeared from view.

Davies relayed the rest of the Doctor's message to the Brigadier personally, while he and the other crater guards were still blinking in the bright lights of the laboratory.

'He's certain we should wait?' the Brigadier asked.

'Sounded most insistent, sir,' Millar confirmed.

'I suppose we've got no alternative but to follow his lead.

Stand ready, all of you. Osgood, watch the readings. Prepare to move portal on my orders.'

To himself he thought: I hope you've got this right, Doctor.

Grover urged them on down through the forest towards the beach at a brisk pace, determined they should not spend one minute more on Salutua than they could help. He had learnt a lesson here, albeit at a terrible cost. There were some things money could not buy, and others that were not worth the price you paid. He glanced back at de Veer and Dodgeson. He hadn't really played fair by them, yet they'd acquitted themselves well. He'd have to make it up to them somehow.

And Montgomery, for all his faults, had remained cheerful and surprisingly staunch in a crisis. Nancy he hardly dared look at. It was too painful. He could never forgive what she had said and done, and yet seeing her in the clutches of that monster had taught him that affection, even if misguided and betrayed, could not so easily be expunged. Parting officially –

and permanently – from Nancy would be an ordeal he dreaded. And then there was Sternberg, whose dreams he had been forced to shatter. What about...Where was he?

He looked around to find the scientist twenty yards behind them.

'Keep up, man!'

'I am sorry,' Sternberg panted, drawing level. 'I had a stone in my shoe. I had to remove it.'

'Okay. Just be careful you don't get left behind.'

'I assure you, Mr Grover, that is not my intention.' They hurried on.

The globe had come to rest hovering perhaps two thousand feet up, directly over the crater. The UNIT party watched it in expectant

silence. Long minutes passed without any sign of activity. Liz wondered if negotiations were being conducted even now between the two strange races, so different from each other and human kind, linked only by those possibly universal traits of acquisitiveness and retribution. She reflected that one could hardly hold Nancy Grover's failings against her, when even such advanced races as these clearly had not progressed beyond such behaviour.

Then there was a flicker of motion.

The sky over Salutua became clear and sharp for the first time in over fifty years.

'He's turned off the cloaking field,' said the Doctor. 'A symbolic act, perhaps?'

Brokk's craft rose above the crater rim on fiercely glowing thrusters, its dark hull almost invisible in the night. For a moment it also hovered motionless, then it arrowed upward directly towards the other craft. Fire flashed from its bow. The Semquess globe rolled almost lazily to one side. A scintillating rod of pure energy lashed out and struck the smaller craft.

'Cover your eyes!' warned the Doctor.

There was a blaze of light.

Liz had been a little slow, and the afterimage of the explosion floated across her retina. The sound of the blast reached them as it washed across the island, the shock-wave setting the leaves and branches of the upper canopy tossing.

From somewhere came the groan and splitting of wood as a giant tree toppled. The air seemed to be filled with the zip and screech of flying red-hot shrapnel, briefly illuminating the sky like a blossoming meteor shower.

'Thousands of fragments, each carrying a trace of omicron radiation,' said the Doctor, with grim satisfaction. 'One of those will reach the sea and turn up in a shark about forty years from now, and the whole cycle will start again.'

A painfully bright object, like a tiny sun, could be seen falling out of the sky where Brokk's ship had been.

'The ship's power core,' the Doctor explained.

The core dropped back into the crater and vanished. The steady vapour plume of the volcano suddenly brightened and a billow of vapour mushroomed skyward. The Semquess ship dropped low down over the crater and hovered there for a moment, as though viewing the remains. Apparently satisifed, it rose into the night sky once more, steadily accelerating. As they watched it dwindled to a point amongst the stars and was gone.

There was another anticipatory silence, then Benton said:

'Bit of an anticlimax, that. Aren't there going to be any more fireworks?'

'Soon enough, Sergeant,' the Doctor assured him. 'When that core burns its way down to the magma chambers under the island, then you will see plenty of "fireworks". At about ten o'clock local time, just as the Brigadier warned us.'

'Do you think those Semquess guessed that's what's going to happen?' Liz speculated.

'Very likely,' agreed the Doctor.

'And they don't care?' exclaimed Mike.

'From their point of view it is very convenient. They don't want anybody learning about their genetic mutation serums, but this island has already been contaminated. Sufficiently advanced techniques might reconstruct the serums. So it must all be destroyed, and, ironically, Brokk has provided the tool to do that for them. Call it a drastic form of copyright safeguard.'

There was a distinct tremor underfoot that caused them to stagger slightly. Smoke and steam began to boil out from the cone of the volcano at an increasing rate, lit from below by a brightening fiery glow.

'I hope the Brigadier hurries up, then,' said Mike.

'He should have no trouble steering the portal now. With fragments of the ship spread all over the place, the stabilization effect should be equal across the whole island.'

'You hope,' said Liz.

'I know,' said the Doctor with a smile, pointing over her shoulder.

A free floating disc of light was drifting between the trees towards them. Through it they could see the lights of the laboratory. At the controls of the time bridge stood a familiar figure.

'You'd think he'd look happier to see us,' observed Liz.

Grover's party ran the last quarter mile down through the forest.

Already animals were fleeing the vicinity of the volcano, whose fire-wreathed summit cast a ruddy glow over the entire island. Birds fluttered squawking through the branches. A solitary giant ant skittered across their path, confused and purposeless. Crashes through the undergrowth about them told of unseen beasts taking flight. Fortunately there was no sign of the giant bats. Would they leave their roosts amongst the great trees before the lava reached them? Either way, without the power of flight, they were doomed.

The tremors were growing stronger by the time they burst panting through the last line of palms on to the beach. Grover flashed his torch out into the lagoon to where the *Constitution* was now anchored, hoping that the sailors who had escorted the exhausted Ferraro had made it back all right and passed on his message. Apparently they had. In moments the lights of the launch could be seen heading towards them. It slewed about in the shallows in a wash of spray, and bobbed to a halt without touching the sands. They waded out to it and piled aboard without ceremony. The engine roared, throttle open wide, and they swung about in an arc and headed out towards the Constitution for the last time.

'What an incredible sight!' exclaimed Montgomery looking back, voicing their unspoken thoughts.

The red light of the volcano glittered across the waters in their wake. A steady fountain of fire now boiled about the summit, and from it a plume of smoke towered thousands of feet into the sky, spreading like a great dark fan, eclipsing the stars and moon. Forks of lightning played about its inky convolutions.

Then the launch grated against the *Constitution*'s pontoon, and an urgent voice was calling down from above: 'Captain says cut the pontoon and launch loose – no time to take them aboard!' Even as he spoke they heard the clink and rattle of the anchor chain being wound in, and the throbbing pulse of the pistons reverberated through the hull. By the time they had climbed the ladder to the deck the *Constitution* was under way.

Amelia was waiting for them at the head of the companion ladder and she threw herself into her father's arms, sobbing with relief. Standing beside her was Miss Ellis, who smiled benevolently at them, and at Grover especially. Nancy looked at father and daughter for a moment, then silently headed for her cabin, head hung low as though to hide her face. Amelia wiped her eyes and called after her, asking how she was, but there was no response.

'Never mind, Amy,' Grover said. 'Let her be for now.'

Sternberg did not hide his feelings so carefully. He scowled in open disappointment at Grover, then stomped away himself, hunched over, hands pushed into his pockets, radiating high dudgeon. Amelia watched him go, frowning. 'I understand about Nancy, but I didn't realize how badly the Professor would take giving up the ampules.'

'He'll have to live with it, Amy. Maybe he can learn something from the samples he's already got, but somehow I think it'll be beyond him.'

'And there's certainly no going back after more, is there?'

she said simply.

'Not now,' he agreed.

Threads of lava could be seen running down the cone of the volcano. Fires were already burning in the forest about its flanks. Fresh tremors were sending shockwaves rippling across the surface of the lagoon, causing fish to leap from the water in alarm. A booming roar, like continuous thunder, smote their ears as the yacht steamed on. They cleared the reef almost before they knew it, the passage out from the calmer waters at least being easier than their entrance had been.

Gradually Salutua began to drop away behind them, but Pascoe maintained full-speed.

De Veer, Dodgeson and Montgomery leant on the stern rail. They were tired and grimy from their exertions, but too fascinated by the awesome spectacle of destruction to leave their vantage point just yet. De Veer shook his head regretfully.

'The world will never know the picture they missed!' he said, raising his voice to be heard over the fulminations that rumbled out over the ocean after them. 'What a cast we had!

Volcanos, giant beasts, statue men from outer space and creatures

from under the sea...'

'Not forgetting Michael Montgomery,' Montgomery added modestly.

'And time travellers from the future,' Dodgeson chipped in. 'I sure hope they got away safely.'

'Still, we've got some story to tell,' said Montgomery. 'I'm going to dine out on this for months.'

'But who's going to believe it all? Where's the proof?' de Veer said.

'We've got some film – and Professor Sternberg's samples,' Dodgeson pointed out.

'And my giant ant head,' Montgomery said proudly. 'Wait till I get that stuffed and mounted!'

De Veer shook his head. 'Won't be enough. We need the island to clinch it – and look at it!'

'Won't anything survive?'

'A few of those crabs maybe, but who knows? Perhaps they needed the island for special food, or something, and will start shrinking again after it's gone.'

'What had they got against the bats anyway?' Montgomery wondered. 'That shindy of theirs almost looked like a regular match.'

'I guess we'll never know now,' said Dodgeson.

There was a massive explosion that lit up the sky. The whole island seemed to be on fire. The sound of the blast when it reached the ship made them cover their ears and flinch aside by reflex. That single outpouring of raw sound seemed to last for minutes before slowly fading away. When they looked again the island had vanished in a pall of steam and smoke. Out of this rolled a huge continuous wave, flashing in the moonlight, breaking over the reef and surging out into the open ocean towards them, reaching steadily out to the horizon on either side.

A shout came down from the bridge: 'Everybody put on your life jackets and hang on. We're going to ride it out!'

As they sprang to the lockers, the *Constitution* swung about until its prow faced into the tidal wave. The note of the engines dropped until

it just held its way. The wall of water bore inexorably down upon the ship out of the night. They were over the deeps now, and that had robbed it of something of its power, but even so it was still 25 feet high.

It struck the *Constitution* squarely with a shock that reverberated from stem to stern, bursting across the prow with a boom and roar, throwing up a cloud of spray, lifting the ship as though trying to upend it bodily, yanking their arms in their sockets as it tried to break their holds and send them sliding aftward. The yacht bucked like a roller coaster car, and then snatched the decks away from under their feet as they were over the crest and plunging sickeningly forward, with the propeller thrashing in open air. The prow burrowed into the water, sending up a second gout of spray, and seemed intent on dragging the whole ship after it into the deeps. Then, slowly, it lifted. The fore decks were awash, water running in torrents across them and pouring over the sides. As the load was discharged, the *Constitution* rolled and bobbed, then found an even keel. Behind them the tidal wave rolled on out into the Pacific, to be absorbed by all its thousands of miles until it was just another ripple in the eternal swell.

Slowly they found their feet, glad to be alive. Anxious enquiries revealed everybody was safe, and, bar a few sprung plates, so was the ship.

Montgomery summed it up succinctly. ‘Well, fellows, looks like it’s back to the studio for us. Anyone want a drink?’

The Doctor beamed with satisfaction as they saw the tiny image of the *Constitution* within the visualizer coil turn for home. He began powering down the system, then glanced apologetically at the Brigadier.

‘Sorry about that, old chap, but we had to see they got away safely, you understand.’

The Brigadier’s moustache bristled, as though he was about to express himself forcefully on a matter currently close to his heart. Benton and Yates, standing close beside him, winced visibly in anticipation. Noting this and guessing the likely objects of his ire, Liz said quickly: ‘But we must compliment you on how well you managed while we were gone, mustn’t we, Doctor?’

‘What? Oh, yes, absolutely. You really did splendidly, my dear fellow. Operating all the equipment like that. Could hardly have done better

ourselves, could we Liz?'

'I'm sure we couldn't. And it was such a comfort knowing you were here, working so hard to get everything fixed properly –'

'Enough!' said the Brigadier. There was a respectful silence. He glowered at the two scientists for a moment, then, with a visible effort of will, continued on calmly. 'We will discuss the matter of your recent exploits at a more suitable time. For the moment you are to concern yourselves exclusively with explaining these UFO sightings and apparitions we've been plagued with.' He pointed to a side table stacked with reports and video cassettes. 'There is all the available information. I expect your preliminary appraisal and recommendations in one hour.'

'Don't we even get a chance to clean up and have a bite to eat first?' exclaimed Liz.

'No, Miss Shaw,' the Brigadier replied, with what she thought was a hint of righteous satisfaction, 'you do not.

Because your galavanting through time has left none to spare.

Tea and sandwiches will be brought in, but you will both get straight to work on the current problem. The situation is rapidly getting out of hand and before worldwide panic sets in UNIT must supply some answers. The Prime Minister and the Secretary General expect it of us, and I expect it of you. Do I make myself perfectly clear?'

'Perfectly,' replied Liz, in a meek voice. When he chose, the Brigadier could be rather overpowering, she realized. And also very right.

'Quite so,' said the Doctor, with disarming reasonableness.

'You leave it to us, Lethbridge-Stewart.' Abandoning the time bridge controls, he picked a report off the top of the pile and began reading it with a great show of total concentration. Liz quickly joined him in his studies.

The Brigadier surveyed them both with satisfaction, and turned to Yates and Benton.

'You'd better check the motor pool and see that all vehicles are ready for use. Chances are we'll have to examine one of these "mirages" ourselves shortly, to get some first hand information. Leave room for the technical gear, and –'

The laboratory lights flickered, then went off.

There was a moment's black silence, then the emergency generator started up automatically and the fluorescent tubes popped and flickered back on again.

'That's all we need,' exclaimed the Brigadier. 'Better check if it's a mains failure.'

'It's all dark outside, sir,' said Mike, who was looking out through the laboratory's tall, uncurtained windows. 'Wait a minute – I can see some lights now.'

'Perhaps it's us then. Get maintenance on to it right away.'

Mike was still staring out of the window. 'That's odd. The lights aren't where they should be.'

The dull surprise in his voice was so arresting that everybody turned to stare at him, then at the window.

'Somebody turn the room lights off again,' the Doctor said in carefully measured tones. The tubes blinked out, and they crowded up to the windows. Ranged about them in the darkness, glowing faintly at first but growing stronger by the second, was a complex, misty checker-work of city lights.

But they were not the lights of the London that they knew.

Eighteen

ternberg bolted the door of his laboratory cabin, muting Sthe rumblings of the distant eruption, and sat down on a stool, trembling with relief. He was certain he had made it here without arousing suspicion. They all thought they had seen a resentful man running to his cabin to hide, perhaps to avoid witnessing the destruction of the island that had been so crucial to his plans, unaware that Salutua mattered nothing to him anymore.

They had failed him. So they would not share in the triumph that was to come. That was only natural.

With great care, he pulled the two remaining ampules from his pockets and laid them on the worktable before him, gazing at them almost reverently. Eventually he dragged his eyes away to glance at the clock mounted on the bulkhead.

Patience, he counselled himself. He must have patience. It would be necessary to wait a little while longer for their secrets to be revealed.

Nancy Grover's manner when she spoke to her maid was so untypical that it left the girl, who had worked for her for three years, quite speechless.

'Please give me a few moments alone, Tilly,' Nancy said gently, with a sad, brave smile. 'You do understand? Thank you.'

The door was closed and locked, leaving the maid standing in the corridor.

Nancy turned and saw her reflection in the dresser mirror.

Her expensive dress was torn and grimy, still damp from wading out to the launch. Her shoes were ruined, her hair a tangled mess and her face smudged. But more than that, the life seemed to have been drawn out of her. Her shoulders sagged and her eyes were no longer keen and challenging, but dull and downcast. She stood with the weight of guilt and shame for her selfishness hanging heavily on her shoulders for all to see and, perhaps, even to pity.

Nancy straightened up and smiled knowingly at herself.

Nobody ever really gave her proper credit for her acting ability.

Briskly she pulled off her dress and threw it aside. A strip from the bottom of her slip had been torn off, folded over to form a long tube of material, and tied about her waist. She undid the makeshift pouch carefully, taking care not to spill what was wrapped within it, and tucked it away under her clothes in a bottom drawer.

There was some shouting from above, the engine note changed, and the ship began to turn. Tilly was suddenly at the door again, knocking urgently.

'Mrs Grover? The Captain says to put on life jackets.

There's a big wave coming.'

'Thank you, Tilly,' she replied easily. 'You put on your jacket like he says. I'll be perfectly all right here, don't worry.'

'Yes, ma'am,' came the uncertain reply.

A minute later the wave hit, pitching the cabin about wildly, sending

loose items flying off the dresser and side table. Nancy held firmly on to the head of the bolted-down bed with a slight smile on her lips. Actually she found the motion rather exhilarating, because she felt no self-doubt or fear anymore; her plans left no room either for these, or even for admitting the possibility that a mere tidal wave could upset them. There came a distant crashing of glassware. The galley or the saloon bar? No, Sternberg's laboratory, of course. Her smile deepened. Well, that didn't matter now, and the tidying up would keep the man occupied for a while.

When the ship had settled, she unlocked the door and rang for Tilly. By the time her slightly green-faced maid arrived, she had put on a robe.

'Please run a bath for me, would you, Tilly?' she asked with sweet composure, much to the girl's continuing amazement.

'Yes, ma'am. Er, are you quite all right, ma'am?'

'Oh, I'm perfectly fine, Tilly. Apart from being rather dirty.'

'Yes, ma'am. I'll start your bath right away.'

Inwardly Nancy smiled as she watched her go. She would need to play the part for a little while yet, but how long?

Allow an hour for freshening up and food, say, and another for the excitement to wear down and natural exhaustion to set in. Then most of the ship's company and crew would be asleep. And then it would be time to begin.

Nineteen

ddly enough, it was the absence of ordinary street lights that Liz noticed

O

first.

Even through the shifting curtain of misty haze she realized that the familiar orange-yellow sodium vapour standards had gone. Instead, on either side down the length of the street the curbing was glowing a soft blue, while the centre was marked by a row of luminous, red rectangular dashes. Along the middle of the traffic lanes, spaced every ten yards or so, were broad arrowheads in glowing green, presumably

indicating the direction of traffic flow. It took another moment to register that the directions were reversed from normal. Directly opposite them, however, the colourful luminous road markings seemed to fade out, as though the shimmering curtain was not as close in that direction – no nearer than the far side of the street. On this side of the curtain a stretch of ordinary dark tarmac could be seen.

Still trying to take in the transformation, Liz raised her eyes. The few lighted windows visible in the building opposite seemed much as normal, but just what was that beyond it?

Suddenly the patterns of lights over the rooftops resolved into recognizable forms and a sense of perspective asserted itself.

She was looking up at a city of skyscrapers, far taller than any other structures ever erected in Central London, dwarfing the UNIT building and its surroundings. She felt overawed. What was worse, the image seemed disturbingly familiar at the same time, and it took a second to realize where she had seen its like before. It was in a tinted version of the classic twenties black and white silent film *Metropolis*. The city of the title also had soaring towers with aerial bridges and roadways slung between them, spanning the concrete and glass canyons formed by their stepped sides. There was the same Art Deco feel to the sculpted forms around her now. She remembered that the model sets depicted biplanes flying gracefully, if improbably, between the great buildings, even as she saw that there were lights moving in the sky between these buildings as well. However, though the fuzziness of the scene made it hard to identify the craft, she was certain these were not biplanes.

The Brigadier finally found his tongue.

‘Good grief! It’s those mirages – they’re all around us!’

‘No, Brigadier,’ the Doctor said solemnly, ‘I suspect these are more than simple illusions. That *is* the world outside.’

Liz gulped and tried to speak calmly and rationally in the void the Doctor’s pronouncement had left.

‘It’s not a parallel world is it, Doctor? Like the one you travelled to during the Inferno project? Has some sort of dimensional barrier come down, bit by bit? That would explain the so-called mirages and other sightings.’

‘No, Liz. You might open up short-lived transdimensional wormholes

between timelines, but never anything like this.

This is still our timeline, just slightly altered.'

'Slightly!' exclaimed the Brigadier.

'But something similar, then?' Liz persisted. 'We've just been back in the past. Suppose we accidentally changed the course of history and time itself.'

'But we know we didn't. Everything ended as the records and the evidence showed it should. Besides, if an alternate timeline had rewritten this one due to our actions in the past, then any changes here would have occurred instantaneously the moment we went back, and all knowledge of the intervening years would have been wiped out because it would never have existed in the first place. Whereas these sightings and other manifestations have been occurring for almost a day, correct Brigadier?'

'Almost, counting from the first reports.'

'There you are. Time is involved somehow, obviously, but there's more to what's happened than a simple retroactive temporal re-adjustment in response to our recent journey.'

The Brigadier looked askance at the Doctor's casual words.

'Then all that out there is definitely real?' said Mike. 'Only it looks so blurred and misty.'

'That may be a purely local condition intervening,' the Doctor replied, still peering intently at the incredible scene and frowning. 'It's real enough, but there's some other factor here that we haven't taken into account. If I can have a moment to think –'

The laboratory door banged open and made them all start.

It was Corporal Bell.

'Sir, communications are down. Can't get anything but static...' she trailed off as she saw the view through the windows.

'Thank you, Corporal,' the Brigadier said quickly.

'Something's happened outside, as you can see, but we're not sure what yet. Keep monitoring and stay alert. Benton, better issue arms to all personnel. It seems deserted outside at the moment, but we must

be –'

There was the sound of running feet outside and Farley burst into the darkened laboratory. His tunic was missing and a half-tied bandage flapped from his injured shoulder.

'They're gone!' he blurted out, voice cracking. 'They're all gone! It went dark, then the lights came on and –'

'Farley!' the Brigadier snapped. 'Pull yourself together, man! Explain clearly what's happened.'

'Sir!' Farley stood to attention, though still visibly shaken.

'I was downstairs in the sickbay getting treated, and the medic had almost done when the lights went off for a moment.

And...'

'Well?'

'When they came back on again, the medic and all the furniture in the other half of the room – they weren't there any more, sir!'

'What?'

'Just a sort of dark mist, with the walls showing through it beyond – like it was an empty room on the other side. And then I ran out into the corridor, and the end of that had gone the same way, and the rest of the squad were down there. I called out, but there was no answer!'

For a moment there was a stunned silence, then Mike said:

'It sounds a bit like what we can see outside.'

'Precisely.' The Doctor pressed up close to the window, looking left and right. 'Yes, you can see that the boundary line curves in towards the frontage on either side of us.'

'You mean,' said the Brigadier slowly, 'that it's inside the building already. We're in the middle and completely surrounded by whatever it is?'

'But that's almost like we're in the middle of a bubble, with the centre in here,' said Liz. 'In the lab itself I mean.

What's so special about...Oh, the time bridge.' She crossed quickly to

the control console. ‘Doctor, it’s still on! The rheostat control is not quite on zero. There’s a little power still trickling into the system.’

The Doctor was beside her in two strides, examining the controls in turn. ‘You’re right, Liz. I didn’t quite finish powering down, did I? You interrupted me, Lethbridge-Stewart, if you recall. But perhaps fortuitously in this case.’

‘Do you mean the bridge is somehow protecting us from the effects of these mirages?’ the Brigadier asked. ‘Like a shield from some sort of external force?’

‘It seems a strong possibility.’ He pondered for a moment.

‘Didn’t you mention earlier that Britain was the last country to be affected by these phenomena.’

‘Yes it was. You mean the bridge has been protecting the *whole* country!’

‘Or at least slowing down the process. Turning it off – or nearly so – when we finally returned, may have allowed a sudden advancement of the changes we can see around us.’ As he spoke he carefully increased the power to the bridge slightly. ‘It would probably be best if the power stayed on for the time being, I think.’ Nobody disagreed. He crossed to an equipment shelf and picked up a radiation detector and an electromagnetic sensor.

‘But what’s happened to everybody who was caught on the outside when this thing formed? Are they gone for good?’ The Brigadier’s face set like stone. ‘Doctor, are we…the only ones left from our…proper time, in the country…the world?’

The sudden appreciation of the situation clutched at their hearts. The enormity of it was almost too much to take in, Liz felt. Perhaps that was fortunate.

‘It is a possibility,’ the Doctor agreed solemnly, his steady gaze passing over each of them in turn. ‘It may also be possible to restore normality again, but I won’t know for sure until I gather further information. Which is why I must examine that interface, and conveniently we don’t even have to leave the building to do so. Coming, Liz?’

‘Right with you, Doctor,’ she replied, trying to sound businesslike.

‘Just a minute,’ said the Brigadier, recovering his composure and

authority. ‘We must proceed sensibly if our manpower is – limited. Farley and I will go with the Doctor and Miss Shaw. Yates, you and Benton go in the other direction to confirm this…thing –’

‘Interface,’ reminded the Doctor helpfully.

‘This “interface” is there as well, and exactly how far it reaches into the building.’

‘Don’t get too close to it,’ the Doctor warned them. ‘We don’t know exactly what we’re dealing with yet.’

‘You mean it might be dangerous?’ asked Mike uncertainly.

‘Not in itself, perhaps. But it marks a boundary of some sort, and perhaps different rules apply on the other side. So until we know what they are…’

‘Yes, go carefully,’ the Brigadier emphasized. ‘Round up anybody else you can find and send them up here, as it seems the most central place. Also check the armoury is still accessible, and bring along any kit that might be useful. Bell, keep listening out for anything on the radio. Who’s on duty with you?’

‘Parkinson, sir.’

‘Well brief him as to what’s going on. Otherwise just get on with your jobs, but stay alert.’

‘Understood, sir.’ Bell left.

‘Osgood?’

‘Sir?’

‘You stay here, keep a watch at the window and note anything else that happens outside.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Osgood, clearly feeling he had a task well within his scope.

The Brigadier turned to Farley. ‘Right, Private. Lead the way.’

The interface was as Farley described it.

A shimmering wall of thin mist with blackness beyond it, angled across the lower corridor, and slightly tilted to the perpendicular.

Looking carefully you could see that the lines of the corridor continued past the intangible curtain, but that it was simply not lit as was this side. Liz thought she saw rubbish scattered across the distant floor. She and the Doctor cautiously held out the detectors and examined the readings, while the Brigadier and Farley looked on impatiently.

'Well it doesn't seem to be active in any way we can detect,' the Doctor announced at last.

'Then what the blazes is it?'

'Simply a division between here and there, between two different states of being, as it were. Like the boundary between oil and water in the same jar – no existence in itself, merely a surface tension effect within each fluid.'

Liz had been watching the interface closely where it touched the wall. 'Doctor, I think it's moving.'

'Ah, I was afraid of that. We'd better see how fast.' He fished in his pockets to find a pencil, and made a mark on the wall just in front of the shimmering line. As they watched, silently and inexorably the interface crawled up to it.

'Hmm, about an inch in ten seconds. Which means a foot every two minutes, thirty feet an hour. Assuming the rate is constant.'

'Then it's closing in on us.'

'Yes.'

'And when there's no room left...Can we pass through it, or will we cease to exist as well?'

'Only one way to find out,' said the Doctor.

He thrust his arm through the interface.

From the laboratory window, Osgood saw the dark, squat six and eight wheeled vehicles appear at both ends of the street almost simultaneously. Their heavily moulded, streamlined forms reminded him slightly of classic American aerodynamic automobile styling of the fifties. Hatches opened and teams of dark blue-uniformed men began to disembark in a purposeful manner that suggested they were either military or police, though he could not see enough details at

this distance to be sure. Should he warn the Brigadier now? No, watch a little longer to see what they did first.

While some began erecting barriers across the street, others grouped about the curving perimeter of the interface to stare up at the UNIT building, gesturing to each other. One touched the shimmering curtain cautiously. Obviously it was just as much a puzzle to them, Osgood realized, as the mirages had been to us. The idea cheered him. If other people were as baffled as he was about what was going on, he wouldn't feel quite so left out of things. And while they were content simply to observe and scratch their heads, he was happy to watch them in turn.

Unfortunately this status quo did not last long.

Outside, squads were forming up and setting off at a trot, disappearing out of sight down the passageways on either side of the building. And by now Osgood was fairly sure they were carrying weapons of some kind.

This, he thought, would be a good time to warn the Brigadier.

Yates and Benton returned just as the Doctor withdrew his arm from the interface.

'You shouldn't have taken the risk!' Liz scolded.

'Not all that risky,' the Doctor admitted with a slight smile.

'I waited until the pencil mark I made on the wall became visible on the other side of the interface. If graphite could pass through, it seemed reasonable that I could as well.'

'Did you feel anything?'

'A slight tingle, nothing more. I think it's safe to investigate further.'

'Just a minute, Doctor,' said the Brigadier, turning to Benton and Yates.

'There's no one else, sir,' Mike reported flatly. 'There aren't many people around at this time of night anyway, and the rest of the time bridge squad must have been down in their quarters or the showers – all in places beyond the radius of this... interface, when it appeared. Bell, Parkinson, Osgood and ourselves are all that's left.'

The Brigadier looked disappointed but steadfast. ‘We’ll just have to manage with what we’ve got, then. At least you’ve found some armaments, I see.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Benton, as the two sergeants began unslinging the extra guns, radios, torches, pouches of spare magazines and bandoliers of grenade-festooned webbing they were carrying. ‘Armoury’s still there, as well as the stores, generator room and a slice of the car park. Pretty dark beyond that, though.’ He nodded at the interface. ‘This thing seems a bit closer down there.’

‘It is all round us, then?’ asked Liz.

‘Yes, miss. Goes right through every room and corridor down the other end. Dead spooky it is, too.’

‘I agree with your sentiment, Benton,’ said the Brigadier, buckling on an extra belt hung with grenades and a magazine pouch, then picking up a machine-gun. ‘Nevertheless we shall have to put up with it. Our next step must be to make a reconnaissance beyond the interface. We cannot plan a strategy without intelligence on what we’re dealing with out there. Agreed, Doctor?’

‘Perfectly, Brigadier.’ He looked on with slight reproach as the Brigadier checked his grenades. ‘Though there’s no reason to suppose the inhabitants of this timeline are hostile, you know.’

‘Can you guarantee that, Doctor?’ the Brigadier replied sharply.

The Doctor sighed. ‘No, I can’t.’

‘Exactly. We’ll go prepared just in case, then. Believe me, I’m not looking for any more trouble than we have already.

Benton, you come with us. Farley and Yates stay here.

Sergeant, you’ll be in command if I do not return.’

Mike nodded grimly. Liz started forward.

‘No, Miss Shaw, you stay as well.’

‘But –’

‘Common sense, Miss Shaw. I will not risk both members of my science team. If we do not return, it will be up to you to provide Sergeant Yates with whatever technical support he requires in

whatever action he may see fit to take. Is that understood?'

'Yes, Brigadier,' she replied simply. He was making a habit of being very right, she decided.

'Good.' He turned back to Mike. 'We'll be no more than half an hour. Radio checks every five minutes. If we lose contact, don't come after us. Right, let's be off.'

He braced himself and stepped through the interface. For all their differences in the past, Liz suddenly realized how terrible it would be to lose him. He was a brave man doing his duty regardless of circumstance, and there were not many such people about. The Doctor followed him, and Benton gingerly brought up the rear. All three seemed unharmed by the passage. They saw the Brigadier speaking, but could hear nothing. He extended the aerial on his personal radio, motioning for Mike to do the same. There was no contact.

'Just like the portal,' said Mike. He gave his set to Farley.

'Hop through and be ready to relay any messages. I'll stay this side and relay the other way.'

'Yes, Sarge,' said Farley, slinging his gun and stepping through the interface with obvious reluctance. He held a brief conversation with the Brigadier on the other side, then the reconnaissance party set off cautiously along the corridor.

They watched them disappear from sight, then Mike turned to Liz.

'Better go back to the lab for a while,' he suggested.

'Maybe you can think of something to do with all that gear you've got there, because I think our military options are getting rather limited at this point,' he added with a tight wry smile.

She found his frankness rather disturbing. What were they to do? She nodded simply and walked back towards the laboratory, realizing how tired she was. Too many shocks and too little sleep over the last 36 hours. She'd thought the worst of the surprises were behind her when she returned through the time bridge, but really they were only just warming up for the start of the main event. Or the finish. For good. The universe could be a very unfair place, she decided.

Halfway up the stairs she met Osgood coming down at a run.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I think we’ve got visitors coming…must warn the Brigadier.’

‘He’s just gone through the interface to explore the rest of the building.’

‘Oh hell –’

They ran back down the corridor to Mike. Osgood gabbled out what he’d seen from the window. Mike stepped through the interface to speak to Farley, who put the radio to his lips and started speaking. As he did so, Liz heard a slight sound and spun round.

The door at her elbow, which led into the supposedly empty sickbay that Farley had vacated in panic not long before, was opening.

Benton found it unnerving to explore the length of the dark and dirty corridor and look into the rubbish-choked rooms, dimly lit by the diffuse light radiating from the skyscrapers shining through the grimy windows. Obviously the building on the other side of the interface had been unused for some time. Bar an unexpected additional door here and blank wall there, the layout was familiar but also depressingly different from the busy, purposeful place he had known only hours before. Functions also seemed to have changed. The room they were in now had been the ablutions, but all traces of shower stalls and associated plumbing were gone as though they had never existed. Perhaps, here, wherever it was, they never had. His faint hope that they might find the missing men withered away rapidly.

The Brigadier kept them moving briskly.

‘Let’s see if the street doors are where they should be, and take a look outside.’

Then the radio crackled with Farley’s voice.

‘Osgood’s seen what he thinks are soldiers entering the building on either side, sir,’ he reported. ‘Sergeant Yates says to watch out –’ There was a sudden exclamation, then: ‘We’re being attacked!’

The radio went dead.

Together they sprinted back the way they had come, rounded the corner and collided with a squad of six men in dark blue uniforms.

Surprise and the confines of the corridor saved them.

There was not time to use their weapons except as clubs, because they were instantly engaged in hand-to-hand combat, and anybody on either side who had fired at that moment would have run as much risk of hitting a friend as a foe.

Benton drove the butt of his gun into the pit of one man's stomach, twisted about, and punched it up into the jaw of a second by pure reflex, sending the man's heavy helmet flying from his head. Then he drove back down again on to the neck of the man still in the process of doubling over from his first blow, dropping him to the floor. Only then could he step back and level his gun, but by then the melee was over. It had lasted less than five seconds. The Brigadier was ably demonstrating that he had forgotten none of his early training as he felled the second of his opponents with a chop to the neck, while the Doctor's unique brand of unearthly martial arts had clearly despatched his adversaries almost before they had time to realize they were in a fight.

But even as they caught their breath, there came the sound of many pairs of boots pounding out of the darkness at the end of the corridor.

'Keep going!' the Brigadier shouted, and they dashed on.

The footfalls sounded louder behind them. Benton twisted round and fired a burst from his gun down the corridor to discourage the pursuit. Bullets ricocheted satisfactorily from walls and ceiling. They saw the place where the interface crossed the corridor, and dimly through it the shapes of struggling figures. Bodies lay on the ground on both sides of the misty curtain.

With a shrill whine, a pale blue beam lashed out of the darkness behind them. Where it struck the peeling brickwork of the wall, the whitewash scorched and flakes of brick flew away as though a pneumatic drill were driving into it. The beam swung sideways even as the Brigadier pulled the pin from a grenade and tossed it back down the corridor. It detonated as they dived through the interface. The echoes of the explosion abruptly vanished. An attenuated blue beam glimmered through the interface to play feebly across Benton's back as he twisted aside. There was no pain. It was suddenly no warmer than a sunbeam.

Osgood was slumped against the wall with blood trickling down his face. Mike was wrestling on the floor with a blue jacketed figure,

while two more of them were sprawled beside him. The Brigadier lunged forward to help.

'No, wait!' the Doctor commanded. 'Look!'

Even as he spoke, the "bluejacket" began to grow faint.

Mike gasped as his fingers suddenly closed through the body of his opponent as though it were turning into softening jelly.

Then he was clutching at a wraith, then a shadow, then nothing. The unconscious bodies on the floor vanished even as they watched. As the Brigadier helped a dazed Mike up from the floor, Bell and Parkinson pounded down the corridor from the other end of the building.

'There were soldiers, sir,' Bell gasped, wide-eyed. 'But they just disappeared...'

'We know. Watch the corridor. Shoot anybody who shows themself.' He turned back to Mike. 'What happened, Yates?'

'They came through the sickbay, sir. Don't know how they got in there...No warning, tried to grab me, but blazed away at the others...' He looked around. 'Where's Farley – and Miss Shaw!'

There was a groan from the sickbay. The Doctor plunged through the doorway with the others behind him. Farley was struggling to his feet, holding his stomach tenderly, then pulling his hands away as though he expected to see blood or worse. He looked up at them in wonderment.

'They shot me,' he gasped, 'but now there's nothing there!'

‘Never mind that now,’ snapped the Doctor. ‘Where’s Liz?’

Farley pointed through the interface that divided the room in half to a door in the far wall, which had not existed an hour before.

‘Sorry, I tried to stop them…They took her, Doc. Through there.’

A frightened and furious Liz was carried rapidly out of a side entrance, past what seemed to be a small army of

“bluejackets” surrounding the UNIT building.

She would cheerfully have bitten any of the men who held her if she had the chance, but a broad strip of silvery tape had been stuck over her mouth. She would have struggled more forcefully, but more of the same material bound her arms behind her back and her ankles together, leaving her quite helpless. It seemed to harden in place like steel bands as soon as it was applied. She had no idea how it worked, but it did its job with undeniable efficiency, and the bluejacketed soldiers or militia or whatever they were, had seemed ominously practised in applying it. She tried to hold the anger in her mind and not to dwell on what might come next.

Once in the shelter of the cluster of vehicles parked at the end of the road, she was hauled upright for a moment before a

“bluejacket” who seemed to have more insignia on his epaulets and cap than the rest. He gazed at her intently for a moment, then consulted a red-bound book with gilded lettering on it.

‘Yes, this looks like Shaw.’

Liz’s eyes widened.

He thrust his face eagerly towards her and spoke slowly, as though she might be stupid or a foreigner.

‘Are you Doctor Elizabeth Shaw?’

Stunned, Liz could only nod.

‘Do you work for something called UNIT?’

She nodded again.

The man beamed in delight. ‘Right, that’s her. Well done.

Take her straight to St Paul's. Hop to it, you don't want to keep *them* waiting, do you?'

'No, sir – I mean yes, sir.'

A low, curved, six-wheeled van was waiting with its back hatch open, flanked by two "bluejackets" mounted on motor cycles. Inside were wire mesh cages with a single bench seat, each just big enough to hold one person. She was pushed into one of them. A seat belt was buckled across her waist, the cage door closed, then the outer van door. The darkness was not complete, and she realized there was a tiny barred window behind her head. As she twisted round to try to look out of it, there came the purr of an almost silent motor and she felt the vehicle move smoothly away.

Liz had time for one last despairing glance before they turned the corner and the besieged UNIT building disappeared from view.

But one thought dominated over all the rest of her fear and confusion.

They knew her name.

They had been expecting them!

Twenty

ancy was still in her bathrobe when there came a nervous Nknock at the door.

It was Sternberg. As soon as she saw his face she could guess what he wanted; why couldn't the fool have had a little more patience, she thought with exasperation. She could not say so out loud, however. She had to play the role for a while longer.

'That will be all, Tilly, thank you. The Professor has kindly come to see I haven't suffered any harm from the handling of that dreadful monster,' she explained gracefully.

Once her maid had departed her manner became markedly less relaxed.

'What are you doing here, Professor? I told you I'd come to your cabin later, so nobody would suspect. You don't want to spoil everything, do you?'

He mopped his brow – a habit that was beginning to annoy her.

‘Forgive me, Mrs Grover, but I could not wait. You’ve no idea what torture it has been for me to sit and stare at these ampules and not be able to begin work upon them.’ He pulled the ampules from his pockets and held them out to her.

‘Please! Show me the secret of how they are opened as you promised.’

With a supreme effort Nancy restrained herself from screaming at him. Through clenched teeth she grated: ‘You were meant to keep them hidden in your cabin, Professor.

Suppose somebody wondered what those lumps in your pockets were? How can anybody educated like you be so dumb-stupid?’

The insult did not seem to register with him. He merely continued to look at her with the same pleading light in his eyes. She’d seen it before in fans desperately pressing forward to see her, thrusting out their autograph books hopefully. It made her feel angry, yet powerful at the same time.

Suddenly, as in the pit that morning, which seemed an age ago now, something snapped within her. But it was not rage, rather cold calculation and reason that flooded her mind. She seemed to be looking down on herself and the pitiful man before her as though from a great height, like Brokk had done.

She began to appreciate how puny they all must have looked to him. It was quite understandable that he had used Ferraro and herself in the way he had, forcing the Doctor to repair his backpack and the soldiers to protect him from the Semquess.

And why not? After all his life was at stake. Self-preservation.

It was the only game in town worth playing, when you thought about it. You used anybody and anything to win through. And when you were done with them, or they became a liability...

She suddenly smiled at the Professor, in the way that had set a few million adolescent (and some not so adolescent) male hearts beating faster in recent years.

‘I’m sorry, Professor,’ she said silkily. ‘I didn’t realize quite what it meant to you. Sure I’ll show you, but you need the right light to see what to do. Why don’t you sit down, and put the ampules here under the lamp...’

She arranged him at a side table, then casually walked behind him and leant over his shoulder, talking all the time.

His eyes never left the ampules.

'It's easy if you know how,' she purred in his ear. 'The giant put the trick of opening them into my mind so I could check the seals for him while he was carrying me through the forest. These things were never made for those big hands of his, and I could feel how anxious he was about them and how valuable they were. But I fooled him when he ordered me to put them back in his pouch again, and I dropped them into that clump of ferns instead. You found them okay, didn't you?'

'Yes, they were where you said. Please, Mrs Grover.'

Nancy continued almost teasingly. 'Then a little way on he sees that other flying ship and gets all panicky and puts me down in the tree. Then you all came along a few minutes later.'

'This I know, please –'

'And I told you quietly, as we headed back, what I'd done to try to make up to Amelia, and that you'd have to smuggle the ampules on board because they could only be hidden in pockets. But most of all, not to let on to anybody or they might take them away again. Remember? And you did it all very smoothly too.' Her voice rose. 'Except you can't be patient for just a couple of hours more. You have to know right now!' Her displeasure resurfaced forcefully, making him flinch away from her.

'I'm so sorry, but –'

'Well never mind,' Nancy calmed sweetly, abruptly sounding forgiving once more. 'Here's where you get what's due to you, Professor.' She pointed at one of the ampules.

'See that groove there?'

'Yes.' Sternberg leant forward eagerly.

'Well, you've got to give it a good hard knock – like this!'

Nancy swung the heavy marble ashtray she had picked up as she had been speaking with all her strength. It connected with the back of Sternberg's head. Surprisingly quietly, without any fuss, the little man toppled to the floor of the cabin and lay very still.

For a moment Nancy stood over him in silence, looking from his body to the ashtray, then let out her breath. So, it was as easy as that. She'd never have guessed, considering the fuss they usually made about it. There was just a dark pulpy stain on Sternberg's head and a smear of blood on the corner of the ashtray. Remarkably little mess, considering. Wouldn't even have to ask Tilly to clean up. Tilly. Yes, she'd have to deal with her next. It was not as she had planned, but perhaps it would be good practice for the rest. In any case, she had to move quickly now before Sternberg was missed.

Purposefully, she dragged his limp form into the bathroom by the ankles and closed the door. She recovered the improvised pouch from its hiding place and laid it on the table beside the ampules.

For just a moment she felt an anticipatory shiver of doubt and fear over what would come next, even though the shape of it was lodged firmly in her mind. But her hands seemed to take on a life of their own and unrolled the pouch so that its precious contents spilled out. The sight reassured her, and certainty returned. Smiling to herself, she pressed, squeezed and twisted the lid in the correct sequence, and the ampule containing the bubble of amber fluid opened smoothly.

There was nothing to fear, it was simply the ultimate contract. It would be the best career move of her life.

Twenty-One

hey looked down in silence from the laboratory window at the de

T

parting van carrying Liz, and the ranks of armed men now surrounding the building.

The Brigadier, whether through instinct or training, had resisted their natural impulse to charge on after the men who had spirited Liz Shaw away through that unexpected doorway, and Mike realized now that that hard decision had probably saved their lives. He looked ruefully back at their own small band. Seven men. Eight when Osgood, presently slumped groaning in a chair, recovered from his crack on the skull. He turned to the Brigadier and tried to keep his voice level.

'The odds don't look too good, do they, sir?'

'Not that favourable, I admit, Yates. For the moment we must stay alert, hold our present position, and try to plan some strategy not

involving an open confrontation.'

'And Miss Shaw?'

'If humanly possible, we shall attempt to rescue her. But if our duty to our country and its people – to get them back from...wherever they are – should require it, then she must be abandoned. You understand? That goes for all of us if the situation arises, myself included.'

Mike nodded, stone-faced.

'But what *can* we do, sir?' asked Farley.

'Think!' interposed the Doctor, with unusual fervour. 'The answer's here somewhere. If we know what's happened and why, we'll know what action to take.'

'All right, Doctor,' agreed the Brigadier, 'do your best while we have a breathing space. Our only advantage at the moment seems to be that they can't get at us effectively before fading away into nothing. Most extraordinary thing I ever saw,' he admitted.

'Yeah, what's that all about, Doc?' asked Benton. 'And how come their guns can blow holes in brickwork but only give Farley a nasty turn?'

'The intruders faded away because we must be in alternate timelines, separated by that interface, and they simply did not belong in this one,' the Doctor explained. 'Some interpenetration is possible, but clearly only for a limited time.

The alternate lines are each trying, so to speak, to shape the same fundamental building blocks to different patterns. The patterns of those soldiers, or whatever they were, did not exist in our little bubble of reality, so they simply vanished.'

The Brigadier paled slightly. 'Would we fade away as well if we stayed outside too long? And what about Miss Shaw?'

'She still seemed okay when they were carrying her off,'

Benton said quickly. 'By then she must have already lasted longer out there than they did in here.'

'Gratifying but puzzling,' admitted the Doctor, rubbing his chin. 'But why the difference?'

'What about those guns?' Benton persisted, with soldierly interest.

‘They appeared to project some form of energy beam, which would probably be more susceptible to attenuation inside the interface,’ the Doctor speculated, ‘so they only delivered a relatively mild shock on this side of the divide.

Gross physical matter clearly lasts longer, but still fades in the end. That is why all the light we see from outside is distorted and seems paler than it actually is. Wait a minute…Light.

Energy. That’s why Liz didn’t fade. Artron energy!’

‘Translate for us, Doctor,’ pleaded the Brigadier.

‘A by-product of a simple unshielded time bridge. Liz must have soaked some of it up. Combined with the interface effect it’s stabilizing her. All of us as well, for that matter – even you, Brigadier, having been close to the bridge for some hours. I only hope it lasts long enough for us to get her back.’

‘Is it dangerous?’

‘Oh, no. Not at these levels.’

‘I’ll take your word for it,’ the Brigadier said dryly. ‘I suppose we must be thankful that this wretched interface thing exists at all, since it seems to be keeping us alive.’

‘Yes, but that still doesn’t explain *why* it’s here in the first place. Every sign indicates an alternate timeline has absorbed our own, but why not totally? And if it was caused by some action of ours in the past, what was it, and why didn’t it take effect immediately?’

The others looked helpless. ‘Sorry, Doctor,’ said the Brigadier, ‘that’s the sort of question we usually ask you. All I can say is that just about every rule I know has the odd exception. Maybe this is one of them.’

The Doctor scowled in thought, then asked curiously: ‘Can you find that report about Grover’s yacht surviving the volcano, the one you relayed to me while we were by the pit in the forest?’

‘Of course.’ The Brigadier went over to the table where the papers and video tapes had been stacked and rummaged for a moment. ‘Yes, here it is – wait a minute…’

Mike saw the strangest expression spread across the Brigadier’s face and he sprang forward in alarm, fearing for a moment his superior

officer was having some sort of seizure brought on by the strain of the situation. But the Brigadier was simply staring at the paper sheet in his outstretched hand.

Mike's gaze automatically followed his.

The words of the photocopied press report were blurring and re-arranging themselves before their very eyes.

It was the strangest journey Liz had ever taken, if also one of the most frightening. In every sense of the word she was being carried helplessly into the unknown. Despair for herself and the others threatened to overwhelm her, but with a deliberate effort she concentrated instead on the cityscape flashing past her.

The van and escort, blue and white lights flashing, did not stay on the illuminated streets beyond the UNIT building for long. Soon they turned on to a long ramp which led up to an elevated roadway network that had never existed in the London she knew. In minutes she had lost all sense of direction. The limited angle of view she had through the tiny cage window did not help, and all she could do was twist about and snatch glances as they passed, trying to memorize landmarks in case she had the chance to retrace her route. That of course presupposed she would be free to do so. In her present circumstances it seemed a forlorn hope.

They climbed by stages up more ramps to a dizzy height and on to an aerial highway, a regular grid of crisscrossing roads suspended between the great buildings. Some spur roads she saw actually entered the great towers through archways set ten or twenty floors up. In contrast below her was a web of streets reminiscent of the old London. Even with the illuminated road markings it looked like an undercity, cowering in the shadow of the ruling elite who dwelt in the towers above. Come on, she told herself, that's just an old cliche. Perhaps it was, but it seemed a very believable one at that moment.

The few vehicles she saw on the road were all similar to her own in their bulbous, streamlined styling and dark colours.

Were they all official vehicles travelling along reserved official levels, or was there only one predominant make? She saw no sign of any pedestrians. If there were any about at this hour, she supposed they must be confined to their own walkways at different levels. Unfortunately, these images of uniformity and regulation only reinforced her instinctive feeling that they'd arrived in some

totalitarian society with unknown, and possibly harsh, rules.

A society that already knew her name.

The Doctor was by their side in two long strides, reading over their shoulders. He was in time to see the words of the report re-form themselves into a new configuration. One key line immediately caught their attention: '...also reported lost on the island, along with several crewmen, was Professor Friedrich Sternberg, of Zurich, Switzerland...'

'But Sternberg got away with the others,' said Mike. 'We saw him. Unless anything happened before he got back to the ship.'

'I swear to you, Doctor,' the Brigadier said gravely, 'that there was no mention of this originally. It said quite clearly that all the passengers on the yacht got away safely – I can't explain it.'

'I can,' said the Doctor, solemnly. 'I think I understand it all now. You were right, my dear Lethbridge-Stewart, there are exceptions to the rule. That original information from which that file was derived has been altered by an inherent instability in time itself. One centred on Salutua at the point we visited it. An uncharted temporal probability nexus.'

'In plain English, please, Doctor.'

The Doctor looked mildly despairing.

'The structure of time, loosely speaking, has a certain

"resilience". That is, it resists and absorbs minor changes. If it were otherwise, time travel would be far too dangerous. A probability nexus, however, is akin to a ravelled knot in time, where multiple strands of causality are exposed and at their weakest, and where the smallest alteration to the course of events can produce aberrant loops of existence, or even entirely new alternate timelines. The facts I confirmed with you, Brigadier, belonged to a different probability thread, which is why they did not relate to the new reality outside and are unstable, as you saw. It's a temporal maze, which you can never leave by the same route you entered.'

'Wait a minue, Doctor,' said Mike slowly, struggling to understand the concept. 'Earlier you said that couldn't be an alternate time out there because the changes happened gradually.'

'Normally that would still be true, but I should have realized when Liz

found the time bridge was still active what had really happened. Because of the weakness of the nexus, the bridge short-circuited the continuum, forming an interactive parallel causality feedback loop. That world outside has existed as a sort of shadow of ours over the intervening years, an alternate probability only brought into existence when the time bridge was powered right down the last time.'

The Brigadier was looking pained and lost again. The Doctor added quickly: 'While the bridge is operating, which it has been for some hours now, time here and forty years ago is loosely but effectively joined together. Which is why the changes only started here *simultaneously* with actions in the past that had an effect on the timeline.'

'When you saved Grover's party in the forest, you mean?'

Mike suggested.

'Yes, but even more likely when you rescued Amelia Grover and discovered Brokk frozen in the pit, and initiated the sequence of events that led to the conflict over the ampules. The activities of two alien races on Earth at the same time must have a significant influence on the instability of the nexus probability pathways.'

Mike was now looking alarmed. 'You mean, all this might be my fault!'

'It's nobody's fault, Mike,' the Doctor said reassuringly. 'If you hadn't found Brokk, somebody else in the party would have. Or he might have lain there a few more years until another expedition came along. There is unavoidable coincidence within a nexus. Call it random destiny, if you like.'

Mike wasn't sure that he did. The Brigadier spoke up firmly.

'Doctor, now you seem to have worked this business out, is there anything you can do here and now to put things back the way there were again?'

The Doctor shook his head.

'We would have to extend the time bridge field to cover the whole world, and that would require more time, equipment and vastly greater power than we have available. The only alternative is to find out what the critical event is in the past that was altered, and go back in time to negate it.'

‘Good. A clear objective at last.’ The Brigadier looked relieved.

‘But we must get Liz back before we do,’ the Doctor said.

‘Why? Won’t she simply stay wherever they’ve taken her while everything changes back to normal around her?’

‘Yes, but it will be a sudden transition. She might come back occupying the same space as another object or person in the restored timeline. Apart from being fatal to her, it could cause a massive explosion. We must get her back!’

The Brigadier looked anguished but firm.

‘Doctor, you know I can’t let the safety of one person, or even a handful, influence me, when literally the whole world is at stake. I only wish it were otherwise.’

‘Well consider this,’ the Doctor pointed out. ‘They must be taking her to see someone in authority for questioning, and Liz will certainly try to find out about the history of this timeline in return. She might have picked up some useful clues as to how it came into being. Anything to pinpoint our target will be a help. At the moment we can only guess it’s linked with Grover’s party on the yacht, but nothing more.’

The Brigadier tugged at his moustache in deliberation.

Mike could see he wanted an excuse to attempt to rescue Liz, but had to justify the risk. He watched him closely, hoping he could learn something. One day such a decision might be his to make.

‘Of course, if there was any way of getting Miss Shaw back without further jeopardy, that would give us an operator for the bridge. We’ll need everybody we can spare for the mission team itself. But we haven’t much time and we don’t even know where they’ve taken her.’

‘We can track her with the artron energy detector,’ the Doctor said quickly. ‘She must be the only source outside the interface.’

‘We’ve still got a jeep down in the parking bay,’ Benton added enthusiastically.

‘But how far would those soldiers outside let us get in it?’

Mike pointed out. ‘We need a tank to even hope to get us through that lot!’

As if to emphasize his words, blue light suddenly flickered over the windows of the lab. Mike shielded his eyes against it and peered out.

'Well it looks like a tank is just what they've got, firing a heavier version of that beam of theirs.'

'They've found they can't send men in, so they're trying to blast us out,' exclaimed the Brigadier. 'Doesn't seem to be working, though.'

'It won't,' said the Doctor. 'But how long before they realize that, and resort to old fashioned material projectiles?

They could do serious damage before they faded away.'

Mike's heart sank. 'This dishes our chances of getting out after Miss Shaw, though. We might be safe in here, but that beam would go right through us on the outside.'

'Maybe we can sneak out the back,' Benton suggested.

'Bound to be covered.'

'It's a pity we couldn't take this interface thing with us,'

mused the Brigadier. 'It's the best defence we've got at the moment.'

The Doctor suddenly beamed at him.

'That is a splendid idea.'

'But surely all this equipment is far too much to carry with us.'

'Yes, but we might not need to take it all,' the Doctor said, picking up an energy detector and striding over to the case containing the twisted fragment of metal from Brokk's spaceship which was still wired into the time bridge tracking controls. He held the device close to the case. 'As I thought.

The fragment has been absorbing artron energy, and also has a strong link through the bridge to the past where its previous form also exists. If we carry this, and with the bridge on a higher power setting, the interface will extend around it. That should give us the protection we need.'

The Brigadier considered for a moment, then said decisively: 'All right, Doctor, we'll give it a go. I don't like being cooped up in here, anyway, and it might divert their attention from this building. We

can't risk the time bridge equipment being damaged.' He checked his watch. 'We haven't much time, at the rate that interface was shrinking.

Two hours maximum. If we haven't found Miss Shaw by then we have to go back, regardless. Is that understood? Right, let's get started.'

The van and escort took a branch off the main roadway and began to descend a similar series of long ramps and short level straights. The analytical, questioning part of Liz's mind wondered why the pitch of the ramps was not more smoothly graduated. The humps and dips between each stage of the descent were quite pronounced. Perhaps they'd looked better on the drawing board?

Then they were down amongst the ordinary streets again, and entering some sort of broad square or plaza, ringed with lights. She saw people for the first time. Crowds of them in fact, turning their heads as the motorcycle riders flashed past them. It must be eleven o'clock, so what were they all doing here? Going home after some public gathering, a sports event or concert? Then she realized that while some were dispersing, others seemed to be forming queues in their place.

Perhaps there was a second performance due. As she got closer she saw their clothes were all of solid colours but varied styles, with one-piece boiler suits in blue and green contrasting with tights and kilted tops in white and silver, worn by men and women alike. The effect was striking, and yet there was a curious lack of animation about the crowd as a whole, as though they were performing a familiar ritual of some kind. Echoes of Orwell's *1984* mass hate sessions skittered through her mind. No, the towers and the plaza were too clean and bright for that analogy. Somebody was having fun on a grand scale here, and there had been none in that dystopia.

Liz suddenly realized how much more detail she could see, as though the external reality was harder and sharper. She had hardly been the detached observer while being dragged from the UNIT building, but she recalled the lights and distant structures had still been slightly blurred and unreal, even on the other side of the interface. This might be another aspect of the time change she was registering, but had she or her surroundings changed? Did it mean time was still settling into a pattern, and was that good or bad?

The van and escort swept past the crowds and pulled up before a sweep of steps. The back hatch opened, causing Liz to blink in the

light. The inner cage door was unbolted and she was lifted out. One of her guards bent to remove the silver tape around her ankles, giving her a moment to look around.

Why on earth had she been brought here?

Rising from the middle of the great square was the impressive bulk of St Paul's Cathedral, illuminated by banks of floodlights and seeming much as she last remembered it, except that from the lantern at the top of the dome there blazed a brilliant red light. The people in the square were all either pouring into or out of the cathedral doors in a steady stream. A few gave her suspicious sideways glances as she was led up the transept steps, but otherwise pointedly ignored her. She noted many were holding red books, like the one the officer outside the UNIT building had referred to.

As she climbed the steps she saw where the light illuminating the square was coming from.

Mounted about its perimeter were vast advertising hoardings, perhaps a hundred feet high, the borders of each one lit by thousands of bulbs. For a moment the images upon them were still blurred, but resolved into sharper focus even as she looked on.

Inexplicably, given the location, they seemed to be gigantic film posters.

And the most prominent name and face on every one was Nancy Grover's.

Twenty-Two

illy entered the cabin in answer to Nancy's bell.

T 'Yes, Mrs Grover?'

Nancy was lying on her bed, a wet flannel folded across her forehead and eyes. She was breathing unevenly and looked deathly pale.

'Ma'am, are you all right?' she asked anxiously.

'I don't feel...too well, Tilly,' Nancy replied faintly.

'Shall I send for the Professor again?'

'No. Please...just pour a glass of water and fetch some eau de Cologne from the dresser to rub on my temples. That'll help.'

Tilly did as she was bidden. As she touched Nancy's hand in passing her the glass of water, she exclaimed: 'You've got a touch of fever, Mrs Grover.'

'I feel cold...'

'You must cover up,' Tilly said briskly, pulling the counterpane over her. 'Some rum and hot milk is what you need.'

'The cologne first, please.'

'Very well, ma'am.'

Tilly removed the flannel from Nancy's forehead. Nancy screwed her eyes tighter shut against the light. Tilly splashed a little of the aromatic spirit on to her fingers and began to rub it gently into her mistress's hot skin. Then she frowned and looked closer.

'Why, Mrs Grover, have you been bitten by a mosquito or some such? You've got a little –'

Nancy opened her eyes.

Tilly's scream was snuffed out even before it began.

An hour later, when the ship was sleeping, Nancy let Tilly out of the cabin. The maid headed directly towards the crew quarters on the lower decks. She moved very quietly but with an inner purpose. There was a slight distracted smile on her lips. As she went, she rubbed her forehead as though it itched.

Nancy watched her go with a far deeper and more knowing smile, then turned in the other direction.

David Ferraro woke suddenly from the depths of exhausted sleep.

The eye!

No. He was safe in his cabin on the *Constitution*.

Dimly now he recalled two crewmen half-carrying him there. He remembered looks of pity, disappointment and incomprehension on their faces. He understood why. He had deceived them: the whole crew, the ship. Because of his weakness they had stayed longer than they needed on that cursed island and more men had died. Because of him.

Ferraro tried to move and discovered he ached in every limb. His hands were cut and blistered. The skin of his face was tight and dried from the heat of the giant's fire, his throat and chest raw from smoke. But it was his pride that hurt worst of all. He always thought himself a hard man, but he had been used like a feeble-minded fool, callously and calculatingly: first by Nancy Grover, then by the giant. He felt dirty inside, as though he would never be clean again. The memory of that terrible red eye boring into him would not go away.

He sat upright with an effort, shakily reaching for the mug on the shelf at the head of his bunk.

'Let me get that,' said a cool voice.

He scrabbled for the light switch.

Nancy Grover was standing beside his bunk, smiling like a cat. For a moment he gaped at her in amazement, then his rage boiled over.

'What're you doing here? You have the brass-necked nerve to...Get out of my sight you conniving bitch!'

'David, that's no way to talk, after all we've meant to each other.'

'Get out before I –'

Her eyes widened. Above them a light...

He shrank away.

'No, please. Not again...'

'Don't worry, David. It's all right.' She was holding something in her hand that glittered. 'This time it will be easier. This time, nothing will stop us.'

Twenty-Three

ike thought the space remaining in the parking bay Menclosed by the interface had shrunk noticeably since he and Benton had last seen it. The curvature of the misty curtain, where it cut through one side of the bay, was also becoming apparent, as the bubble shrank back against the pressure of reality from outside.

And he would be remaining inside it.

Benton, laden with assorted weaponry, headed for the jeep, but the

Doctor stopped him.

‘We’ll take Bessie,’ he said, carrying the fragment of Brokk’s spacecraft over to his bright yellow Edwardian roadster, and wedging its carrying case firmly in the foot-well between the back seats. Mike saw the Brigadier roll his eyes heavenward in dismay and grinned, despite the circumstances.

It was well known that the Brigadier hated riding in the highly distinctive vehicle, which he considered an undignified means of transport for an officer of his rank.

‘Wouldn’t the jeep be more suitable, Doctor?’

‘With the superdrive I recently installed, I think you’ll find Bessie is somewhat faster. She also has a built-in kinetic damping force field in lieu of seatbelts. I’m counting on that to boost the interface effect.’

‘If you say so, Doctor.’ The Brigadier sighed, turning to Mike. ‘All clear, Yates?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Keep the lights out after we’ve gone and lie low, and maybe they’ll think we’ve all bolted. If we’re not back in two hours, or the building comes under any threat, use the time bridge. Board that yacht if you can and try to find out what caused everything to go wrong, if it really started there. Then, well, you’ll just have to use your initiative.’

‘Understood, sir. Good luck.’

The Doctor, Brigadier and Benton boarded the car, while Bell and Parkinson positioned themselves by the big double doors. Mike turned the parking bay lights out. Bessie’s engine started with an almost inaudible purr. The doors were swung slowly open, letting in a wavering shaft of light that shone down the tunnel from the street archway. Bessie rolled forward. As it reached the interface, which cut at an angle across the end of the tunnel, it bulged out before it, like a soap film being blown from a child’s bubble ring. A mobile and oddly symmetrical cloud of mist seemed to form around the antique car, which suddenly accelerated forward and burst into the street like a greyhound from a trap.

Mike saw flashes of gunfire. He had a fleeting impression that Bessie actually passed *through* a line of trestle barriers without disturbing them, then it was gone.

The first figure Liz saw inside the transept doors was garbed so oddly, that, in other circumstances, she might have smiled and looked around for the rest of the fancy dress party.

Her robes resembled those of a nun, but they were bright red, not black, with a silver sash tied about her waist, emphasizing her figure rather markedly. She also displayed a painted red circle on her forehead, bright red lipstick, long red fingernails, and silver rings and bracelets. Blonde curls peeped out from under her wimple.

It has to be a joke, Liz thought desperately, knowing that it wasn't. The woman moved with assurance and an unmistakable sense of authority. Liz's guards treated her with every sign of respect, bobbing their heads diffidently.

'Is this one of them?' she enquired, looking at Liz with an uncomfortably clinical interest.

'Yes, Sister. She answers to her name, and the description matches the one in the Book.'

'What of the others?'

'Er...we don't know, Sister. Our Captain just told us to bring her here straight away.'

'You have done well,' the pseudo-nun allowed. 'We shall take her now.'

Two other, younger, scarlet-robed women wearing green sashes appeared out of the shadows and took Liz firmly by the arms as the men withdrew. With their silver-sashed leader sweeping before them, they passed through the transept and towards the main body of the cathedral. Liz saw a wall of glass had been thrown across the mouth of the transept, separating it from the crossing under the dome. Beyond were ranks of people apparently engaged in a service. Another pseudo-nun came through one of the doors in the screen and for a moment Liz heard the ethereal echo of chanting, though not any words, and caught a whiff of incense.

She was led to one side along the aisle beside the nave, which had been similarly glassed in. She had a glimpse back into the cathedral choir. The choir screen had gone, and where the high altar had been there now stood a 25 foot high statue of a woman in long robes. A new rose window had been let into the wall behind its head, formed solely of red-tinted glass.

From along the nave, she realized, it would appear as a halo about the statue's head. Slowly, the remorseless repetition of the symbol began to penetrate her deeper consciousness, bruised by too many shocks and revelations that day.

Red lantern, red window, red spots, red eye...

Dazedly, she was led past the ranks of worshippers to what had been the chapel of St Michael and St George, now itself divided from the aisle by a tinted glass screen and door. The silver-sashed nun knocked diffidently, then entered. The chapel interior had been cleared of all traditional religious trappings and now looked more like a palatial office. A massive desk sat in splendid isolation in one apse, while set opposite was a chest-like device on which was mounted an elliptical glass screen some ten feet across.

Behind the desk a scarlet nun sat in a high-backed chair. As she straightened up Liz glimpsed a golden sash about her waist.

The silver sister bowed.

'This is Doctor Shaw of UNIT, Superior,' she announced.

The Superior stared at Liz with undisguised fascination until she squirmed uncomfortably in the grasp of the green novices. She felt like something on a microscope slide.

'So,' she said at length, 'the prediction is fulfilled. The Goddess will want to see this immediately. She has been waiting for news. Place her before the viewer and remove her gag.'

As the Superior began tapping at a keyboard mounted on her desk, a chair was set in front of the glass screen and Liz sat firmly on it. The silver tape over her mouth suddenly loosened and was pulled away. Before she could express her feelings about her treatment, the screen opacified and filled with colour. There was a brief theatrical fanfare of trumpets.

The scarlet nuns bowed their heads. An image appeared. It was a full-length shot of a white-robed woman seated on a golden throne raised on a dais, backed by a haze of light. The camera zoomed in on her head and shoulders, the focus softening slightly. She was an elegant late middle-aged woman with immaculately coiffured blonde hair, and such an apparently perfect complexion that it had to be the result of hours of makeup.

‘Goddess,’ said the Superior in reverential tones, ‘she is here as you foretold.’

The woman on the screen bent forward, narrowing her eyes, presumably to peer more closely at the screen at her end.

‘I remember you,’ she said with satisfaction.

Liz mentally corrected for the nearly forty years that she had bypassed through the time bridge and took a deep breath.

Yes, it was Nancy Grover.

Wrapped within its own bubble of counter-reality, Bessie flew along the deserted London streets under the shadow of the elevated roads and skyscraper towers. She moved like a phantom. Above her, lights now flitted urgently across the skies much lower than they had before, as though searching for something.

In the back seat, Benton rested the mount of his heavy machine-gun on the side armrest while gazing out in wonder at the grey world of shadows just a few feet away. It was hard to believe they were moving. Only a light breeze filtered through the interface. Suddenly he jerked backward in alarm as the image of a perfectly conventional car, complete with a horrified driver at the wheel, materialized out of nowhere in front of Bessie’s bonnet, flashed through like a wisp of fog, and vanished again behind them.

‘What was that?’ Benton gasped.

‘Probability ghost,’ replied the Doctor, without taking his eyes off the road. ‘An image from our timeline briefly resurrected by the proximity of the interface. Almost the reverse of the illusions seeping over from this timeline earlier on. It’s reassuring to see it’s still there, even if only potentially.’

‘Not quite the way I would have put it,’ retorted the Brigadier, seated in the front beside the Doctor and holding the probe of the artron energy detector extended beyond their private bubble of reality. He glanced at the meter again.

‘Better turn left here,’ he directed.

The Doctor braked hard and took the corner on two wheels, somehow not toppling Bessie over or throwing them through the windshield, then sped on. Benton began to sympathize with the Brigadier’s views

about travelling with the Doctor.

‘We’ve been expecting you for a day now,’ Nancy said mildly, still smiling. ‘Odd sightings reported all over the world.’ She frowned. ‘There were lots of flashes of wars.

Have you really been fighting all this time?’

‘No, it just seems like it,’ Liz responded by reflex. ‘What about you?’

‘Just once.’ Nancy looked smug. ‘My scientists said what was happening might be due to some upset in time itself.’

‘We experienced the same thing, apparently,’ Liz replied automatically. She was letting the words flow whilst thinking furiously. ‘Images from your world, I suppose, or perhaps from the altered past. People and places that had existed appearing again. Things that didn’t fit in disappearing temporarily. Interpenetration between the two realities brought about by weak spots in the space–time continuum.’

‘You sound just like the people at the Sternberg Memorial Institute, you know? They guessed the same thing. And that got me thinking. You see, I’d never forgotten you.’

‘How touching.’

‘People from the future – but not *my* future, as things turned out. They called that a paradox, and said you wouldn’t exist now. But I played safe, just in case. I didn’t know when you’d turn up, just sometime about forty years on, maybe in London, you having been British. So I made sure everybody would watch out for you. I even put your descriptions in the Book.’

‘What book?’

The scarlet nuns around her started as though she had said something outrageous. Nancy smiled tolerantly.

‘The book of my life story, of course. Everybody in the world’s got a copy.’

‘Everybody?’

‘Of course. The whole world loves me.’ Nancy tilted her chin up proudly. ‘I’m the greatest movie star who ever lived.

Do you know how many people saw my last picture? Five billion!'

'Most impressive,' said Liz dryly.

'It was directed by Larry de Veer and filmed by Hubert Dodgeson, my favourite cameraman. Remember them?'

'Like it was yesterday.'

Nancy blinked at her for a moment, then laughed rather raucously. The scarlet nuns quickly joined in. Clearly anything that Nancy laughed at was by definition funny.

'That's good,' Nancy admitted. 'Nobody comes back at me with those anymore. 'Course, it *would* be like that for you.

Anyway, they do all my pictures. You see, I never forget my friends.'

'What about your enemies?'

Nancy laughed again more lightly. 'I don't have any enemies.'

'Then what am I? Unless you usually have your friends abducted at gunpoint and tied up.' She shrugged to make her point.

'Release her,' Nancy directed. One of the novices quickly stepped forward and the band fell away from Liz's wrists.

'See?' Nancy continued. 'No problem. All I want from you is that time bridge of yours. That's what you called it, wasn't it? The things that happened over the last day have got the eggheads all shook up. Now they say maybe I was right all along, as if I didn't know, and maybe all this is due to some sort of time machine, and maybe it would be better if it stopped working, because it could upset a lot of things if somebody went back and tried to play around with the past.'

'I can see that might bother you.'

Nancy smiled again. 'But once we get that sorted out, you could be okay here. This is a great place for scientists and engineers. You and the Doctor could fit right in.'

'But it wouldn't be *our* world. This was never meant to happen.'

'Get it straight, Doctor Shaw. Your world's *gone*. This is my world now, and in it what I say goes.'

‘Oh, yes,’ said Liz casually, ‘I wanted to ask you about that. How did you do it?’

‘What?’

‘Everything. Develop all this new technology, establish a personality cult and maintain it. How? Was it something you found on Salutua?’

Nancy smiled. ‘A couple of things Brokk gave me did turn out to be pretty useful.’

‘Gave you?’

Nancy chuckled. ‘I fooled you all, didn’t I, back there by the volcano? You really want to know what happened?’

Liz swallowed. ‘Yes,’ she said levelly. There was an ominous edge to Nancy’s words, but she knew she had to find out the facts.

‘Then just watch.’

Nancy leant towards the screen and Liz realized that her eyes glittered unnaturally brightly. A pucker opened in the centre of her forehead as something pushed forward out of her skull. The skin rolled back to reveal a bright, many-faceted red gem underneath, gleaming like a third eye, two inches across. There was an ecstatic moan from the green-sashed novices, who fell to the floor, arms outstretched towards the screen.

‘You see now?’ Nancy asked sweetly.

For a moment Liz felt sick. ‘What did he do to you?’ she choked out.

‘Do? He only suggested. *I* did it.’ Nancy looked at her contemptuously. ‘Why, don’t you think I had the guts? Just a face and a body and a voice that sometimes slipped a little?

That’s all anybody saw!’ She spat the words out contemptuously. ‘Well the joke’s on them now!’

Her third eye glowed balefully.

Liz felt the warmth pour from the screen. She couldn’t take her eyes off it, and there was no Doctor around this time to break the spell. The light bored into her brain. Her senses swam. She realized now she had misjudged Nancy. What she’d done had been right. Nancy was wonderful. She was the most wonderful person in the world –

The sensation faded abruptly.

Liz found herself pressed up against the screen trying to touch Nancy's image. But Nancy's third eye had closed now.

The novices were grovelling at her feet. With a shudder of disgust, Liz pulled herself away and staggered back to her chair again.

Nancy laughed.

'That was just a sample. If you're lucky enough to be granted a personal audience you'll get the full treatment. Now do you understand how I made everything run my way?'

Nancy tapped her third eye. 'Brokk's in here. A bit of him in every piece of brain crystal. When he realized he couldn't escape, he tried another line with me. The pictures he put in my mind were getting better all the time and I caught on pretty quickly. We made a deal. I'd keep part of him alive, and he'd help me get what I wanted. One of the ampules that was left had something in it that could join different types of life together. Flesh and crystal. Sternberg carried them on board for me, while I smuggled about a hundred pieces of brain crystal Brokk broke off himself. What you saw going back to his ship was just his body, running on what was left of his brain to buy me time to get away. All the important stuff was with me, sort of half sleeping. When I stuck the first crystal into my head it hurt, but it was worth it. His memories and ideas were all there to use. I practised on the ship. When we got home, I started working on people. Turned the depression round and in a couple of years we were running the country.

Then we built a fleet to spread the news around the world.'

'You conquered it.'

'No, we were *welcomed*. Everybody could see it was for the best. Security and work for all. Once I'd got the key people on my side, the rest followed easily enough. Besides, my films had helped lay the groundwork. We had the best colour process around by then, and the colour was a very special red.' Nancy grinned. 'Anyway, we had to spread out.

The Semquess came back in 'forty-one. Must have got wind of the change here somehow. But by then we were ready for them. It was some fight, but they never showed themselves again.'

‘Quite a catalogue of success,’ Liz said lightly, though a terrible sense of futility was growing within her. All she could do was keep Nancy talking, because as soon as she stopped she would be bound to use Liz as a hostage against the others back at the UNIT building, if it hadn’t been taken already. But then surely the Superior or Nancy would have been told?

Perhaps there was still a chance. Her one advantage was that she must be Nancy’s best audience for years, and she clearly enjoyed talking about herself.

‘Why the mock religion?’ Liz added quickly. ‘Wasn’t it enough to be the world’s biggest film star without making yourself a goddess as well?’

‘They voted me in, honest. Screen Goddess to Goddess of the World was only a little step, really. And the Sisters of the Eye are my representatives in capital cities. Why not? The old religions were bunk. I’m real, and I deliver the goods. Regular services remind people of that. The trimmings and costumes,’

– Nancy stiffened slightly – ‘they were my way of remembering Amelia. I thought she’d…appreciate the twist.’

Liz felt cold. ‘What happened to Amelia?’

‘She got away from me,’ Nancy said flatly.

Liz understood. There could be only one way of escaping from the effective ruler of the world. There was a dangerous silence. Then Nancy snapped back as though the previous question had not been asked.

‘Yes, the Sisters keep everything in order while we’ve made progress you wouldn’t believe. Not just building grand cities. With what Brokk knew put into the minds of the right people we’ve made spacecraft that can actually fly to the moon. My next film’s going to be about that, you know. And soon we’ll have this hyperdrive thing worked out. And then –

he can go home.’

‘You mean Brokk? What, in pieces?’

‘We learned how to copy what was in the ampule. Took a few years, but we can build a new body for him now.’

‘Will it really be as easy as that? Without his power, how will you hang on to yours?’

‘The people love me for myself now. I don’t need it anymore.’

‘That,’ said Liz, ‘is the first thing you’ve said that I don’t believe.’

Nancy looked out of the screen in amazement and the nuns gasped. Liz guessed nobody ever contradicted her. But before she could respond, a signal beeped on the Superior’s desk.

There was a rapid murmured conversation, then the Superior looked up at the screen unhappily.

‘Goddess, something strange has come out of the building Doctor Shaw was found in.’

‘That place? Hasn’t it been taken yet?’

‘There was some difficulty with the barrier surrounding it, but as it was shrinking, it only seemed a matter of time.’

‘Okay, so what came out?’

‘A vehicle, they think.’

‘Think? Can’t they tell?’

‘It seems to have...disappeared.’

‘How? You told me the place was surrounded!’

‘It was, Goddess, totally. But it passed through the cordons as though it was...a ghost.’

Nancy’s face was darkening.

‘When did this happen?’

‘I regret, a while ago. The Peace Corps thought they could intercept it with aircars promptly, without incident. But they admit now they have lost track of it.’

Liz’s heart lifted. She should have known the Doctor and Brigadier between them would think of something. Could she buy them a little more time? Before Nancy could respond she suggested, with unmistakable sarcasm: ‘Perhaps they didn’t bother you with the news

earlier because they love you so much and didn't want to burden you with more worries. Or maybe not. People get scared to admit failure to deities and try to cover up. You've heard the saying about absolute power corrupting absolutely, I suppose? Well that's the sort of world you've built!'

They were all looking at her in horror. Nancy flushed dangerously, her regal stance disintegrating.

'You'll regret that!' she screamed. 'Show her!'

The novices grabbed Liz's arms, and despite her struggles pulled her back to the wall. For the first time Liz realized there were silver tape cuffs fixed to it. As she was secured, the view screen swung around so that Nancy's image faced her.

'Do it slowly!' she commanded. 'Until she begs to serve me.'

The Superior stood before Liz. The red dot on her forehead expanded as the flesh rolled back, revealing a third eye slightly smaller than Nancy's. A thin red beam lashed out.

Liz gritted her teeth. It was a stinging sensation at first, not real pain but the warning that it would get inevitably worse.

'More,' shouted Nancy impatiently. 'I want to hear her beg.'

Liz pulled futilely at the cuffs, knowing how immovable they were. But she was determined not to beg.

Then her wrists started to move more freely even as the pain of the beam began to diminish. Nancy's voice seemed to recede. Her hands slid through the cuffs and she fell forward onto the hard floor, which somehow no longer felt as hard as it should. Everything was going grey around her, becoming less real. She could see the floor through her hands.

She was beginning to fade out of existence.

'She's in there!' the Brigadier cried, as the dome of St Paul's rose before them.

'Lummy! What have they done to the place?' Benton exclaimed as they raced across the huge square, people scattering in soundless alarm before them like a bow wave.

‘Her signal’s getting weaker,’ the Brigadier announced suddenly.

‘Hold on,’ said the Doctor grimly.

Bessie bounced as it struck the first step then surged upward in a juddering rush, sending more bystanders diving for cover. The great doors of the main entrance were wide open and they plunged through into the hallowed interior.

‘Bear right!’ shouted the Brigadier. ‘Smoke grenades, Benton!’

Bessie swung about, transforming several members of the congregation into temporary wraiths as they passed through them, and hurtled towards a towering glass partition wall.

Benton instinctively braced himself for the grandfather of all crashes. It never came, but he felt a slight tugging resistance as they passed through. He tossed the grenades out through the interface. Billows of thick orange smoke erupted behind them.

‘In there!’

They plunged through a second tinted glass partition into a large oval chamber and screeched to a halt. Snatching up a compact sub-machine-gun, Benton sprang out of his seat and through the interface into the alternate reality again, covering the four astonished, scarlet robed women before him. He realized the Doctor was bending over a ghostly grey translucent figure on her hands and knees. It was Liz Shaw, Benton saw with horror. The Doctor was trying to help her, but his hands slipped through her body. He could only urge her to crawl the few feet to the car’s interface.

A red beam sprang from the gem on the forehead of the gold-sashed woman full into Benton’s face, making him stagger back blinded, dropping his gun. The Brigadier’s pistol cracked and the light vanished. Benton’s vision cleared and he saw the woman doubled over in pain, holding a bleeding arm.

‘I advise none of you to attempt anything like that again,’

the Brigadier warned uncompromisingly, clearly shocked but undaunted by the display.

‘It’s like the giant at the pit!’ Benton gasped.

They heard the white-robed woman on the big glass screen opposite

them screaming with rage. Suddenly, red light blazed from her eye-gem across the whole chamber. The Brigadier froze, jaw suddenly slackening. Benton got his eyes down in time, picked up his gun and fired a sweeping burst without looking up again. Glass shattered, sparks flew. There was a smell of burning insulation and the image disappeared.

Liz Shaw touched the interface shimmering like a bubble around Bessie. The Doctor grabbed her re-solidifying hand and hauled her into the back seat. Still covering the scarlet nuns, Benton and the Brigadier tumbled back into the car. The Doctor swung them around in a tight circle and they plunged back out the way they had come, through the smoke and partitions, out of the doors, bounding down the steps and racing across the square again.

Liz Shaw struggled upright beside Benton as he held an uncertain arm about her shoulders to support her.

'You were just in time,' she said weakly. 'Thank you. But listen, I know what happened now. We can stop it if we go back and as soon as possible.'

'That's exactly what we intend to do, Miss Shaw,' the Brigadier commented dryly, peering up at the lights of the delta-form craft diving at them out of the night. 'Assuming we get the chance, of course.'

'They can't touch us, can they?' Benton asked. He remembered the tug he had felt as they passed through the glass partition.

As they left the square, beams of light lashed down from the heavens, filling the car with dazzling hot light and blowing a hole in the road before them. Only a ghost of the shockwave reached them, but that was enough to send Bessie swerving across the road, with the Doctor fighting to keep her upright.

'Yes, they *can* touch us, Sergeant,' the Brigadier replied, clinging to his seat as they sped on.

'The interface is shrinking,' the Doctor explained. 'The artron energy must be almost exhausted.'

'So we're becoming vulnerable?' demanded the Brigadier.

'Yes, but only briefly.'

‘Thank goodness for that.’

‘Because *then* we’ll begin to fade away like Liz,’ the Doctor concluded grimly.

Twenty-Four

tabbing energy beams and reflected flashes of explosions Slit up the night beyond the interface. Mike peered out intently through the laboratory window over the rooftops. Fast moving lights in the sky were circling and diving over a spot half a mile away, as though aircraft of some sort were attacking a ground target.

And the focus of their attention was moving rapidly closer.

He spoke into his radio: ‘Bell, Parkinson. Get down to the parking bay. I think they’re coming back. Be ready to give cover if necessary.’

‘On our way,’ the radio responded tinnily.

Mike turned to Osgood, a shadowy figure in the gloom, dutifully standing watch over the time bridge. ‘As soon as the Brigadier’s team are inside, turn the power up to thirty percent to reinforce the interface. Those “bluejackets” may not be content to wait us out any longer, and might try something desperate.’

‘Yes, Sarge,’ Osgood acknowledged mournfully.

Mike looked out at the cordon of men and vehicles closing off the street below, which had steadily edged closer to the building as the interface had shrunk back. Men were running about and vehicles manoeuvring. They obviously knew what was coming. Whether they had learnt anything from their first brief encounter was another matter, but he was prepared to even-up the odds if necessary. Resting on a convenient table were a box of grenades, a heavy machine-gun and an anti-tank launcher. He reckoned the projectiles should last long enough outside the interface to do their job. Stealthily he checked that the window latches were free. He didn’t want to draw attention to himself any sooner than he had to.

Then aircraft swooped over the rooftops above them and explosions blossomed in the adjacent street, eerily soundless due to the muffling effect of the interface. Even as he watched, rising machine-gun-tracer rounds stitched a graceful arc across the sky and struck one of the darting aircraft. It tumbled away across the rooftops and out of sight.

‘Good shot!’ he exclaimed fiercely, punching the air and making Osgood jump. The remaining aircraft broke off their attack and gained height. They were too close to their own forces for safety now.

Then Bessie swerved into view around the corner at the end of the street. The grey bubble that cloaked her hardly extended beyond her front mudguards now and was much more tenuous than he had seen it last. Through it he was sure he could make out four figures. They’d done it! But Bessie was now weaving across the street, driving around men and vehicles as though it could no longer pass through them with the same impunity that it had before. Mike saw an energy beam flare off its bonnet as though it had struck something solid, even as the muzzle flashes from within the shadowy car told of returning fire and grenades blossomed in her wake, keeping the besiegers at bay. She swung into a wheel-locked about-turn as the Doctor desperately sought a clear path back to the car park entrance. But there wasn’t one. The vehicles and reinforced barriers formed a solid wall across the road.

Now for it, thought Mike.

He flung open the window and shouldered the tube of the anti-tank gun. A rush of flame and smoke billowed back into the laboratory as the rocket-propelled warhead sped away through the interface. The front of a hulking eight-wheeled transporter on the road outside disappeared in a silent blaze of light. The concussion kicked the vehicle to one side and toppled the heavy trestle barrier that had stood beside it. Even before the smoke cleared, the Doctor drove Bessie at the freshly opened gap. A fender grazed the wrecked transporter, Bessie slowed, then they were through and hurling forward towards the car park archway. As its tail lights disappeared from view, Mike yelled: ‘Now!’

The mistiness of the interface thickened, briefly challenging the outside reality. Mike allowed himself a deep breath. That had been a close thing.

Bell’s voice spoke out of the radio. ‘They’re all safe and on their way up.’

‘That’s fine. Keep your eyes open down there. Once our blue-jacketed friends get over their surprise they may try something.’

‘Understood.’

‘Thirty percent power,’ Osgood reported. ‘We won’t be able to hold

that level for very long though.'

'Try to be exact if you can, Osgood.'

'About...er, forty minutes, Sergeant.'

'Well keep it there anyway until we hear the news from Ghent.'

'From where, Sarge?'

'Never mind.'

Rapid footsteps sounded on the stairs and a moment later the Brigadier hurried in, with the Doctor, Benton and Liz Shaw following close behind. Their clothes and faces were dusty and smoke-blackened, but otherwise they seemed to have survived their dramatic return uninjured.

'Well done, sir,' Mike said to the Brigadier heartily. 'Glad to see you back safely, Doctor Shaw.'

'The feeling,' Liz said emphatically, 'is mutual.'

'Congratulations must wait,' the Brigadier said sharply.

'We're not out of the woods yet and there's no time to lose.

Thanks to Miss Shaw we know how all this nonsense started.

Our job now is to nip it in the bud. Doctor, can you control the time bridge well enough to put us aboard that yacht?'

'We'll do our best, Brigadier. Come on, Liz.'

The two scientists set to work at the control panels. The Brigadier turned to the others. 'Get the rest of the men up here while we re-arm, Yates. As soon as contact is established we are going through. I just hope it's not already too late!'

Nancy's viewer screen flickered into life once more as a new machine came on line. It revealed the pale, anxious features of the St Paul's Superior. There was a rough bandage about her upper arm.

'Did they get away?' Nancy demanded, before the other could speak.

'Yes, Goddess, I'm sorry –'

‘Where did they go?’

‘Back to the UNIT building, Goddess. We tried to stop them,’ she added hastily, ‘but their vehicle seems to have been protected by the same kind of barrier that surrounds it.’

‘Haven’t you got round that yet? What about the old-style artillery my scientists suggested using?’

‘We have contacted the museums, Goddess, but so far –’

‘Museums!’ Nancy raged in disgust. ‘Don’t you understand? They mustn’t be allowed to go back in time and change anything. Is the barrier still shrinking?’ The terrified Superior could only nod. ‘Then blast everything as it becomes exposed. Cancel the orders about trying to save the time bridge. Take out the foundations, topple the building, whatever, but stop them!’

Nancy broke the contact and sat back in her throne, scowling. Her attendants and advisers started forward, but she waved them away. She looked at their loyal but anxious faces, and at the grandeur of the viewing room of her Hollywood palace. She didn’t want to lose all this. She’d earnt it by having the courage to do a deal with a monster. The memory burned bright within her and she clung to it fiercely. She must not forget, because while she remembered, it must still have happened nearly forty years before...

It must be some awful nightmare, Amelia Grover told herself again. In a minute I’ll wake up. *Please God let me wake up*!

‘Nancy,’ her father pleaded once more. ‘What’s happened to you all? You’ve got to fight it.’

Nancy smiled down at them with a terrible delight. The skin parted on her forehead again to reveal the red pulsing gem beneath.

‘I’m not fighting anything, Marshal,’ she replied triumphantly. ‘Everything looks just fine from where I’m standing.’

Amelia turned her face away in fear and disgust.

She, her father and de Veer, all still in their nightgowns, were huddled together on the chesterfield in the saloon of the *Constitution*. Behind them, holding rifles, were a couple of blank-faced crewmen. Before them were people they thought they knew, now frighteningly altered. Montgomery, Dodgeson and Miss Ellis sat placidly opposite staring

vacantly ahead.

Tilly stood beside them, a smaller gem than Nancy's sparkling on her forehead. Her expression was more animate, but her eyes kept flicking back to Nancy, as though constantly looking for reassurance that she was following orders correctly.

Ferraro entered. For a moment Grover started up hopefully, a warning springing to his lips. Then he saw the gem on the first officer's forehead and sagged back again.

'The Captain and the rest of the bridge crew are all under control now,' he reported to Nancy. Of the three gem-wearers, there was no doubt who was in charge.

'Thank you, David,' Nancy responded politely. 'That takes care of everybody on the ship.' She turned to the three on the sofa with a smile. 'Except you, of course.'

With an effort, Grover faced her squarely and tried to sound reasonable. 'Nancy, listen to me. You and the others are somehow being influenced by those gem things. Think what you're doing. Let us help you get rid of them.'

'Get rid of them!' Nancy laughed. 'Why would I want to do that?' She tapped the eye-gem bulging on her forehead. 'It hurt a little at first, but now I can see the possibilities.' She gestured at the remaining gem fragments and ampules laid out on the table as though proudly displayed. 'If I had enough of those to spare I'd give you some to try yourself, then you'd understand.'

Amelia shrank away instinctively. Nancy laughed at her reaction.

'Don't worry, my dear stepdaughter, I wouldn't waste one on you,' she said contemptuously. 'That's what I want to talk about.' Her expression became intent, and her words were now directed at Grover. 'I've got plans you never dreamt of and you're going to make them happen. I haven't got enough gems for everybody, and putting people right under makes them obedient but sort of wooden, as you can see. So I want to work delicately at first, and you've got the contacts I need.'

Grover looked dazed. 'What do you mean?'

'Congressmen, industrialists, bankers – that sort. There are deals that have to be made; new ideas to get started. You can talk to them. And

if they won't deal, I bet you -know where their dirty washing's kept. You can find a lever on most people if you want to.'

'You know my father doesn't do business like that,'

Amelia protested feebly.

'But he will for me.'

'You're planning something evil. I know you are!'

'Good, evil. That's all you see, but they're just words. I want to make things break my way, that's all. Think I want to be a dictator? Hell no! Matter of fact, life's going to get better for people all over the world, once we spread our influence.

Isn't that the sort of thing your God keeps promising? Well I'm going to make it happen!'

De Veer had gathered his wits by now and spoke up:

'Nancy Norton – altruist and beneficiary of all mankind? I don't believe it. With you there has to be a price.'

Nancy shrugged. 'Sure there's a price, but it's not too steep. Can't you guess? All I want to be is famous. I want everybody to know my name and star in the biggest and best pictures anybody ever made. I might even let you direct me again, Larry, once you've apologized for what you said the other day. Tell me what's so bad about that?'

'Being turned into a zombie!' de Veer retorted.

'Not zombies! I just look for what people really want, and make them realize they'll get it if they do what I say for a while.'

'That's how the giant got into your mind, I suppose.'

'We made a deal, fifty-fifty,' Nancy insisted. She jerked her head towards the three silent figures. 'Don't worry, they'll come out of it when I want them to. By then there won't be any reason to complain. Take Mike Montgomery here. I've forgiven all the digs he made in the past. He can still make films with me. Isn't that true, Mike?'

Montgomery smiled vaguely at her. 'Yes, Nancy. I'm looking forward to it.'

'Of course he won't get top billing any more, but he was getting past it

anyway. He can play my father next time. And Dodgeson can film them.' She tapped her third eye again, a gesture that made Amelia shiver. 'Some of the stuff in here is going to make movies better. Improved cameras, film and processing. He's going to have a ball.'

'And that justifies what you've done to them?' Grover retorted.

Nancy smiled. 'There'll be no more war when my system gets going, because to build the factories and laboratories for what Brokk needs takes peace and organization. What's left of him has to settle here for a while, so it's got to be safe, see?

Now Miss Ellis, for instance, lost somebody important to her in the Great War. I could see it in her mind. So she's not going to kick against it, are you, Miss Ellis?'

Miss Ellis's face became wistful. 'It would be wonderful, Mrs Grover. I do hope you can make it happen.'

'See?' said Nancy pointedly.

Grover shook his head wearily. 'Whatever you've done to these poor people, I still won't help you. Maybe you can hypnotize me too, but what deals do you think I can make in that state?'

'You will,' Nancy said ominously.

Obeying some invisible command, Montgomery and Dodgeson stepped forward and caught hold of Amelia. Grover and de Veer started up, only to feel rifle barrels grinding into their backs.

'No!' Amelia pleaded with them. 'Please let me go!'

'I'm sorry, Miss Grover,' Dodgeson said, 'but this is really for the best.' She was dragged over and forced to kneel before Nancy. Through her horror she heard Nancy's voice, suddenly as clear and cold as ice.

'Amelia's going to be my constant companion from now on. I want to show her how to get results by doing instead of praying. Don't worry, I'll treat her properly – as long as you help me, Marshal. But if you try anything funny, well, I might put the eye on her and start teaching her tricks. Dangerous tricks.'

'You couldn't be so cruel!'

'Don't give into her, Father!' Amelia shouted. 'Don't worry about me.'

‘See,’ Nancy said, ‘she goes on about self-sacrifice all the time. She’s practically begging for it. What’s one life against a whole world at peace, all pulling together. Don’t you want that?’

‘Of course, but not this way. Not at your price!’

‘It’s the only game in town, but suit yourself.’

Amelia felt Montgomery tilt her head backward until she was looking into Nancy’s glittering third eye. Before she could turn away or close her own lids, it began to glow.

Helplessly, she began to slip under its spell.

The *Consitution* steamed onward, its lights glittering across the dark ocean, under a sky still two-thirds overcast by the smoke and ash thrown up by Salutua’s eruption. Then out of the night a disc of light appeared, flying along the line of the yacht’s spreading wake, wobbling slightly as it went.

In the laboratory, they watched the image of the yacht within the time bridge coil grow larger.

‘I can’t improve the stability,’ the Doctor warned. ‘We may have to jump for it when we get over the deck.’

‘Do the best you can, Doctor,’ the Brigadier said. ‘Get ready,’ he warned his squad. ‘Osgood, you will stay here and assist Miss Shaw. It is vital that the power supply to the bridge is maintained, you understand?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Osgood replied.

The Doctor handed over the controls to Liz and turned to face the small group gravely.

‘Remember, we won’t know if this timeline has been restored to normal until we are all back here safely, without leaving any more loose ends in the past. Whatever happens, the ampules and any fragments of eye-gem must be recovered or totally destroyed.’ He turned to Liz. ‘Don’t bother trying to hold it over the deck after we’ve gone through. Pull back a little off the stern. At over ninety percent power and line of sight at least we can use the radios this time, so we’ll let you know when we want to be picked up.’

‘I understand.’ Liz tried to sound cheerful. ‘Go on – and good luck.’

As she spoke the laboratory lights flickered and died, leaving the room illuminated by the hazy glow from the street and the instrument lights now drawing solely on the accumulators. Torches snapped on and a match flared as the Doctor lit an emergency hurricane lamp.

'That's the generator room gone,' Benton said.

'The rate of interface collapse must be accelerating,' the Doctor exclaimed.

'Isn't the higher power slowing it?' Liz asked.

'Apparently not, just making it denser.'

Then lights flared outside the windows like multiple starbursts. They felt the building tremble.

'They're trying to knock the ground floor out!' said Mike.

'We must move *now*,' the Brigadier said firmly. 'Miss Shaw, will you be –'

'Don't worry about us,' replied Liz, adjusting the steering controls to bring the far end of the bridge bobbing over the stern deck of the *Constitution*. 'Do what you've got to do. Just remember there's only about fifteen minutes of full power left.'

'Follow me,' commanded the Brigadier, drawing his pistol and taking up his position in front of the image coil. 'Yates, you've been there before so be ready to guide us.'

'Yes, sir.'

The others lined up behind him, with the Doctor bringing up the rear, adjusting his sonic screwdriver thoughtfully. He flashed Liz a reassuring smile as she fought to hold the bridge steady. As it passed low over the deck, the Brigadier jumped, rolled as he struck the deck, and was back on his feet again.

The others piled through after him.

Liz pulled the bridge away until it hovered unsteadily ten yards off the stern.

'Corporal Osgood?' she said.

'Yes, Doctor Shaw?'

‘Could you light a few more lanterns or candles. It might make the place a bit more cheerful.’

Silent explosions blazed outside. The building trembled again.

They were making their way towards the bridge when they saw the lighted windows of the saloon. Mike signalled questioningly and the Brigadier nodded. They edged stealthily along the promenade deck and Mike peered in.

Nancy Grover was standing arrogantly in the middle of the room, a red gem set on her forehead. In front of her was Amelia Grover. She was holding a knife rather stiffly. Even as he watched, she dreamily started to bring it up towards her own cheek.

Mike kicked open the saloon door and plunged inside, his gun pointing directly at Nancy. The Brigadier and the others poured in after him, fanning out to cover the astonished company within.

‘I am Brigadier Alastair Lethbridge-Stewart of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce,’ the Brigadier’s commanding tones rang out, pistol steady in his hand. ‘I am placing this ship under martial law.’ He glanced across Tilly and Ferraro until his stern gaze rested upon Nancy. ‘I do not normally threaten women, but I have already seen what those gems can do. I assure you I will shoot if you attempt to use them.’

Nancy recovered from her surprise and smiled sweetly.

Amelia dropped the knife from her cheek and turned to face the UNIT force. She started towards them, the blade held out stiffly before her, even as Montgomery, Dodgeson and Miss Ellis quickly stepped in front of Nancy, shielding her with their bodies and allowing her to take a few paces back to join her fellow gem-wearers. The two sailors standing guard on Grover and de Veer began to swing their rifles round. Mike felt a stab of horror. How could he shoot innocent people, mere puppets?

‘Not this time,’ said the Doctor, stepping forward and thrusting out his sonic screwdriver. A small mirror was now mounted on the end. As he thumbed the control a shrill warbling sound pierced the air and the mirror began to spin rapidly, sending a flickering light into every corner of the room.

The thralls reeled back, clutching their heads, sinking to the floor as the control pattern in their minds was disrupted.

‘Good show, Doctor!’ said Mike.

But the distraction had been enough.

Nancy, Ferraro and Tilly were now standing at the far end of the saloon, their eye-gems glowing. A haze of light seemed to fill the air, concealing them from sight. Out of this, pencil-like beams stabbed at the UNIT force. One struck Parkinson on the cheek, causing him to stagger backward, gasping in pain.

‘Take cover!’ yelled the Brigadier.

They dived behind the furnishings and began returning fire blindly into the glowing fog as the eye beams stabbed at them, not daring to risk looking at the hypnotic light directly. Bullets tore holes in the wood panelling and shattered bottles and glasses in the bar, while eye beams set soft furnishings smouldering.

‘Watch out for the others!’ the Doctor yelled.

‘Aim high,’ ordered the Brigadier.

But even as they returned fire, a window shattered from the outside and a rifle thrust through and blazed at the UNIT

soldiers. Mike sprayed a burst of fire in return, peppering the window, and the rifle disappeared. A face appeared at another window, but the Doctor swung his flickering de-hypnotizing light around and it fell away before joining the battle.

‘The rest of the crew must be under their control already,’

snarled the Brigadier. ‘We’re trapped in here!’

Through the image coil they could see the sparks of gunfire on the ship, and the vague shadows of men running across the decks. Liz drummed clenched fists on the console. A battle was clearly taking place, but they could only watch helplessly.

The UNIT building shook again, more violently, reminding her they had their own problems. The flashes of energy beam fire from outside seemed to be getting brighter. She checked her watch against the power levels. Eleven minutes left.

Osgood suddenly gave a strangled gasp.

‘Look, Miss Shaw!’

The far wall of the laboratory was slowly fading into misty darkness.

Sheltering behind the scattered islands of tables and chairs, Grover and de Veer, leading Nancy's dazed former puppets, scrambled into view on hands and knees and joined them at the far end of the room. Mike saw with relief that Amelia looked shaken but unharmed. Benton noted their appearance with a look of satisfaction. He unclipped a grenade from his belt and held it up for the Brigadier to see. He nodded. Benton tossed a grenade into glowing mist. An eye beam vaporized it in mid-air with a flash and mild bang, as the explosive was consumed before it could release its full power.

'Their aim's improving,' Mike observed.

'How long can they keep this up?' the Brigadier demanded.

'For quite a while, I'm afraid,' said the Doctor: 'Look!'

The haze of cordite and the smoke from the small fires started by the eye beams was flowing across the ceiling towards the impenetrable red glow at the opposite end of the saloon, while a chill draught was blowing back at them over the floor. Frost was forming on walls.

'Their metabolisms must have been altered to power the crystals, allowing them to draw heat from their surroundings.'

'I believe you, Doctor,' said the Brigadier. 'How do we stop them doing it?'

'Can't you do something to them with that gadget?' Benton asked hopefully, nodding at the sonic screwdriver.

'Only if they give me time, and I can get close enough,' the Doctor replied, looking about him intently. His eye settled on a large gilt-framed mirror screwed to the wall a few feet away.

'Give me some cover!' he requested, pulling the tiny mirror adapter off the end of the screwdriver. He caught Grover's eye as he huddled behind a lounge chair, with Amelia sheltering in his arms. 'Would you assist me, Mr Grover?' The other took a deep breath and nodded.

As the renewed fusillade of shots rang out they scrambled across to the wall mirror and the Doctor reached up with the screwdriver. With a shrill whine, the screws began turning out of their sockets. 'Get ready to catch it,' the Doctor warned.

The mirror swung loose, then dropped off the wall into their arms. They dragged their burden back to the Brigadier.

'Try not to shoot me in the back,' the Doctor requested, hefting the minor upright like a shield. As the firing renewed, he raised himself into a crouch behind the mirror and started to edge forward, holding his sonic screwdriver at the ready.

The interface had passed through the laboratory windows now. The panes had instantly shattered under the bombardment from beyond. Liz and Osgood unconsciously shrank back within the ever-dwindling circle of reality.

Eye beams stabbed at the Doctor, and were reflected back into the red haze from his mirror shield. He advanced steadily up the length of the saloon. The beams lashed out frantically.

Enough heat was absorbed to begin cracking the glass, scattering the beams in odd directions. He was on the edge of the haze as the wooden backing began to smoke. He activated his sonic screwdriver and held it over the top of the mirror, its pitch cycling up and down the scale. Like Salutua's giant bats, he was probing for the critical frequency.

Suddenly there were cries of pain from within the red haze.

'Stop firing!' he yelled.

Liz and Osgood had backed up against the control console.

The interface had swallowed half the room and was contracting more rapidly as they watched. Beyond were the vague shapes of soldiers and flashes of light. All that was left of the laboratory was the time bridge equipment and the TARDIS, seemingly floating untouched just beyond the shrinking zone of reality. Not quite in our world or the other, thought Liz. Will it survive our passing? What will it feel like to cease to exist? She had been saved on the brink of dissolution earlier. This time it looked as though there would be no reprieve.

Then the interface shivered violently.

'Hold your fire,' the Brigadier ordered.

The Doctor held the critical frequency as the echoes of gunfire died away. The killing beams ceased and the red glow faded. The fierce circulation of air in the saloon calmed and the smoke began to thin.

The Doctor abruptly switched off the shrill sound, leaving a ringing silence in their ears. Nobody moved.

The smoke drifted out of the shattered windows, revealing the bodies of Ferraro and Tilly sprawled on the deck. The sockets that had held their third eyes were empty. Glittering shards of crystal lay about them. Nancy was still on her feet, but swaying unsteadily. One hand was clutched to her side. A dark stain was spreading over her dress where one last bullet had found its mark. Her eye-gem was starred with cracks.

Tiny ruby fragments began to fall to the floor with the drops of blood.

She took a stumbling pace towards them, then another. She was crying – whether for herself or her lost dream, none could tell. Her tears mingled with the disintegrating crystal fragments and ran down her cheeks. She stretched out her arms towards the table on which lay the remaining gems and the two Semquess ampules, dusty but untouched by the battle.

The last fragments fell from the now empty socket of her third eye. She toppled forward, overturning the table as she struck it, scattering the gems into the air to fall about her like a shower of sparkling confetti.

Then she lay still.

In Hollywood, Nancy felt the time wave surge through the years to engulf her, and knew she had lost.

Probability adjusted to a new pattern.

She saw the palace and the world beyond break up like an infinitely complex jigsaw torn apart by a blast of wind. People and golden chairs and marble columns tumbled away, fading as they went. Dimly she heard the voices of her subjects pleading with her.

‘Goddess – help us...’

Then they were gone into the silence.

It hurt to be unable to grant that last wish.

‘I can’t go like this!’ she raged into the nothingness. ‘Not when I’m on top of the world...’

A grey veil closed about her and then she was beyond regret.

She had never existed.

The Doctor stared at the three bodies, and everyone in the room felt the depth of his bitterness. As Amelia and her father stood over Nancy's still form, they heard him say: 'Such a waste. If only there had been some other way.'

The Brigadier spoke up with weary pragmatism.

'Unfortunately there wasn't, Doctor, you know that. It was her life against our world.'

'But her world has died with her,' the Doctor reminded him gently. 'I doubt if it was all bad.'

The Brigadier pulled out his radio. 'Miss Shaw? It's all over. You can probably power-down temporarily while we tidy things up.'

Liz's voice came back sharp and urgent.

'No it isn't all over, Brigadier. Something's *terribly* wrong here!'

Twenty-Five

s the billowing, shimmering interface settled down, Liz Aand Osgood began to make out the world beyond once more. At first it seemed to be in total darkness, but gradually their eyes adjusted and they saw a full moon hanging high above them and a faint glow marking the horizon. But all the rest...

'Ruins!' Liz gasped into the radio. 'There's nothing left outside but ruins.'

The twenty foot bubble of reality that encased the remains of the laboratory was now perched, open to the sky, on top of a crumbling pile of masonry that might once have been UNIT

headquarters. The skeletons of other buildings thrust jaggedly up about them on all sides, stretching as far as they could see under the cold moonlight. A city of rubble-choked streets and decay. A city that had been razed to the ground and abandoned years ago.

Her shoulders sagged under cumulative exhaustion and despair. After all their struggles, they'd failed. Then the Doctor's voice came on the radio, jerking her back to her senses with a series of rapid questions.

‘Liz? Can you see any sign of the towers that were there before, or even the remains of them as substantial piles of rubble?’

‘What? Er…no. Nothing that big.’

‘Any lights at all?’

‘No, none.’

‘Any trees or weeds?’

‘Uh…yes, there are, growing up through the rubble. Quite large ones.’

‘Any radiation? Can you put a geiger counter through the interface?’

‘Just a minute.’

On one of the few remaining racks of shelving was a geiger counter. At Liz’s direction, Osgood picked it up and gingerly thrust the sensor through the interface. The count was normal.

‘Radiation level normal,’ Liz reported.

There was a moment’s silence, then the Doctor said: ‘Liz, your end of the bridge is now in a completely new loop of time, one that must have branched radically years ago. Clearly something is wrong at this end. How much power have you got left?’

‘About eight minutes at full output.’

‘Reduce to thirty percent and watch for a visual signal.

Over and out.’

In the shattered and smoke-hazed saloon of the *Constitution* the Doctor telescoped down the radio aerial to find the Brigadier gazing at him with grim resignation.

‘I recognize that expression, Doctor,’ he said. ‘Tell us the worst.’

‘Our timestream has not re-formed. Until we find out why, we are all still in grave danger!’

Grover, standing beside Nancy’s body while being comforted by Amelia, looked up at him on hearing the word, incomprehension in his haggard eyes. ‘Danger? I don’t understand, Doctor. What else can happen? Haven’t we suffered enough?’ He gestured at the dazed

survivors.

The two crewmen had been despatched to check that the rest of the ship's company was also free of Nancy's influence, but Montgomery, Miss Ellis and Dodgeson were still in the room – deeply shocked and trying to come to terms with the way they had been used. De Veer was trying to reassure them.

'There is still a piece of grit in the cogwheels of time, Mr Grover,' snapped the Doctor, looking about intently.

'Something that is already beginning to influence probability.

Something here that has been altered or does not belong. But what?'

'Well, there's the gems,' Mike pointed out, looking at the scattered fragments on the floor, 'and the ampule. But nobody's going to use them now, are they? We can just take them back with us like you said.'

'Ampule!' exclaimed the Doctor, stooping and picking up the glass cube containing the small bubble of red fluid. 'Only one? Where's the other? Search around, everybody. It's vital that we find it!'

The urgency in his voice galvanized everyone in the room, and in moments furniture and debris were being overturned.

'Here's the cap,' said Mike, retrieving it from under a club chair.

'But where's the bottle itself?'

'It's here,' said Amelia sadly, 'beside poor Nancy.' She stooped, reaching out for the ampule which was half-covered by a fold of Nancy's dress.

'Don't touch it!' commanded the Doctor, making Amelia jerk her hand away in alarm. He crouched beside Nancy Grover's body and carefully drew aside the fabric. The ampule had been resting upended and was now completely empty. The lighter stain of the Semquess drug mingled with the dark pool of blood on the richly patterned oriental carpet, flowing out under the scattered eye-gems.

The Doctor took a step backward, his face ashen. 'It's too late. Get back, everybody!' Uncomprehending, but odedient to the force of his words, they retreated to the far corner of the saloon. 'Benton, fetch that oil lamp. Anything that will burn.

Fire might still stop it if we're quick. Mr Grover, order your crew to prepare to abandon ship –'

'Doctor, the floor!' Mike yelled.

The deck rippled and bulged up under the Doctor's feet, sending him staggering backward. Before their horrified eyes, Nancy Grover's body had simply dissolved away into the carpet, which started to swell and bloat outwards. The scattered eye-gems sank into the pile, melting into veins of red fire, which spread like questing tendrils, pulsing with life.

The deck plates groaned, and the whole saloon trembled.

'Everybody outside!' ordered the Brigadier.

It was too late.

The tendrils spread across the deck and up the walls, dividing into finer branches as they went. The heavy saloon door, which had been opened to let out the smoke, suddenly slammed shut by itself. Farley tried to turn the handle but it was stuck fast. Benton reversed his gun to knock out the remaining glass in one of the windows opening on to the promenade deck, but the frame seemed to crumple inward, pinching shut and almost trapping his gun. He leapt backward with a curse.

'My God, Doctor!' the Brigadier rasped. 'What's happening? What was in that ampule?'

'It must be a highly concentrated genetic catalyser, capable of combining grossly different forms of organic and inorganic matter into a hybrid lifeform. In this instance, Nancy Grover's body with Brokk's eye-gems and the structure of this ship!'

'You mean, this whole place is coming alive?'

'Putting it simply, yes!'

The saloon walls buckled slowly, as though unused muscles were being flexed for the first time, springing wood panelling free and showering pictures and ornaments to the floor. The stoppers popped from the ends of the rack of speaking tubes mounted on one wall. They heard the tiny voices of Captain Pascoe and McCloud shouting in alarm.

Then the tubes broke free of their fastenings, writhing like snakes before tying themselves into knots, and the voices were silenced. From below decks the throb of the engines changed as the pistons faltered, then took on a slower, pulsing rhythm, like a monstrous heartbeat.

'Everybody take cover!' the Brigadier ordered. 'Yates, Benton, get rid of that door!'

The two sergeants armed grenades simultaneously and tossed them both at the base of the door before ducking down behind the chesterfield. The double explosion rocked the room, making their ears ring and filling it with more smoke.

The doorway was reduced to a shattered wreck of splintered wood and twisted ironwork.

'Right, out on deck,' yelled the Brigadier.

But even as he started forward, the crystal veins around the doorway framework began to pulse brighter. Metal flowed like wax. The gaping aperture contracted like a sphincter muscle until there was only a tiny pucker remaining.

'Shall we try the service door, sir?' Mike asked.

'It'll be just the same,' said the Doctor.

'Then I'm open to suggestions,' admitted the Brigadier.

There was a more prolonged groaning noise. Every plate and beam in the ship seemed to vibrate. The red veins began to pulse faster.

As Liz and Osgood watched through the hovering portal, a dull red glow shone through every window and port on the *Constitution*. The ship lost its headway and began to wallow in the swell. There was also something strange about its lines, almost as though it were – changing?

Liz turned up the power and grabbed the radio.

'Hallo. Doctor, Brigadier. What's happening? Where are you?'

The Doctor's voice came back quickly. 'Liz, keep clear and save your power. We're trapped in the saloon, but you can't reach us now without completely re-setting the bridge, and that would be fatal. We'll have to work this out for ourselves.'

‘But what’s happened to the ship?’

‘It’s been contaminated by the Semquess drug Nancy Grover was using. It’s metamorphosing! Doctor out.’

Liz and Osgood stared at each other incredulously.

‘There must be something we can do!’ Liz said.

She was simply giving vent to her feelings. She didn’t seriously expect Osgood to supply any useful suggestions.

Creativity was not his strong suit. But suddenly she saw his face brighten, as though inspiration, against all probability, had struck home.

‘Well, miss,’ he suggested tentatively. ‘There is what happened when we were dumping the warning leaflets...’

Even as the Doctor closed down the radio, the ship groaned once more, and the deck bucked sharply, knocking them off their feet. Plate-sized blisters appeared in the walls, floor and ceiling, swelling as they watched, forming pointed cones, steadily extending into sharper stabbing spikes. It was like being inside a cave, thought Mike, even as he turned about desperately searching for some escape. A cave where the stalactites and stalagmites protruded from every surface, and they grew not by inches over centuries, but inches in seconds!

They saw the bodies of Ferraro and Tilly at the end of the room impaled, before mercifully being hidden from sight behind a lattice of spikes. Montgomery picked up a fallen bar stool and broke it dramatically over the nearest spike, as he must have done with prop chairs in a dozen westerns. The sharp tip broke off, but the stub re-shaped itself into a fresh point as they watched. De Veer and Dodgeson pushed a heavy lounge chair over another spike, but it stabbed through the upholstery like a knife.

The UNIT force’s guns and grenades rattled and blasted, but the damage was swallowed up in seconds. Inexorably, they were driven into the shrinking free space in the middle of the room, stepping around those spikes already erupting through the floor.

Suddenly the Doctor was calling for quiet.

‘Brokk? Nancy Grover? Can you hear me?’ he shouted, his words echoing round the saloon.

‘What are you trying to do?’ demanded the Brigadier.

‘Wait – listen,’ said the Doctor.

The pain had gone, Nancy realized with gratitude, but so had light and sound and touch.

Was this death?

Was she in limbo, or was she headed for Amelia’s precious afterlife? Time to repent after all? Maybe if she really tried...No! She’d be damned if she’d pretend to come over all righteous and proper again. She’d probably be damned anyway, of course.

Then she realized she wasn’t alone. Something was in here, wherever here was. It was coming after her. It was alive.

How she wished she could run, but she no longer seemed to have legs.

Then it was upon her and tearing into her mind.

And then she began to feel again.

Though she had no voice, she screamed.

The spikes wavered then halted their growth, as the ship groaned and trembled about them.

The grating of tortured metal became more rapid, running up and down the scale, melding into more complex structures of tone and sibilance. Then they became harsh, almost unrecognizable words, reverberating from the very structure of the ship itself.

‘Nancy...Brokk...aural recognition symbols...I... *we* are, am *them*...me...’ The voice was uncertain and seemed to have trouble establishing its pitch, and its intonation was erratic.

Suddenly it was full of panic: ‘ *Let me out of here! Amelia, I’m sorry*...’ Then it changed: ‘You are me, thrall.’ Then: ‘ *No!*

Help! Please...’

The voices trailed off into incoherent sobs and indescribable roars, before descending into the creaks and groans of the ship once more. Amelia had shrunk into her father’s arms, while Grover himself looked at them in horrified disbelief.

‘That was Nancy?’

‘The Nancy you knew is dead,’ said the Doctor solemnly,

‘but the pattern of her thoughts has obviously survived.’

‘But the other voice?’ asked Mike.

‘Brokk. Using Nancy’s knowledge to speak in sounds, not modulated electromagnetic wavelengths. Enough of the gems must have been absorbed to reconstitute his memories and personality.’

‘They are actually alive in here?’

‘Two minds inside a hybrid, makeshift body, unfamiliar to both of them. On top of that they have both suffered considerable trauma. They are alive, but in the circumstances I rather fear the experience has affected their joint mental state.’

‘You mean they’re mad?’ Benton said bluntly.

‘Brokk, Nancy?’ the Doctor called out loudly and quickly, to cover Benton’s words. ‘Can you hear me?’

There was a pause, then a groaning ‘I... *we*, are here.’

‘Why are you trying to harm us?’

‘Harm? *Harm!* ’ The walls suddenly boomed at them. ‘I am surviving. That is natural. This new form demands it. *I want to be famous*...No! I will organize these primitives and shape their technologies until they can build a new vessel for me.’

The composite voice seemed to be arguing with itself.

‘Somehow I doubt you will get the cooperation Nancy Grover managed when she tried a more subtle approach,’ the Doctor commented. ‘In any case, that option is closed off to you now. You’re not what you were, and don’t know what you are, yet. I don’t even think your new personality is organized enough to attempt mass hypnotism any more, is it?’

There was what might have been a growl.

‘I recognize you. *Doctor, help!* You repaired *the giant’s*...my, life-support pack. You are different from the others. You will help me... *us, be a star*. No!’

‘You must understand that your presence will devastate this world if you go on as you are. We have had a report from the future, we already know this. But it is not too late to change. I have a proposal –’

‘No proposal. No more talking. I am strong, I am a Grold, *Nancy*, whatever my form. *I was beautiful!* No! I will survive.

You will all... *applaud*...be absorbed!’ The voice trailed off into mad laughter.

‘Absorbed?’ exclaimed the Brigadier.

‘We are what we eat,’ replied the Doctor grimly. ‘Brokk and Nancy have become a hybrid of metal, crystal and flesh. It needs more of the same to feed and grow. The new future has begun. A timeline where this body grows uncontrollably until it destroys civilization!’

The spikes were beginning to close in again, the longest meshing in the centre of the room even as they twisted frantically about to evade them, breaking off the tips with the butts of their guns.

‘Can’t you zap them with your screwdriver again, Doc?’

Benton shouted, flailing at the bristling spines.

‘The crystals are too dispersed to resonate now!’

They were fighting a losing battle.

Then there was a flash of light.

They had a momentary glimpse of the time bridge portal flying through the wall and ceiling at one end of the saloon, then it was gone again. The ship trembled, convulsing with rage and pain. The insane dialogue rumbled on about them.

‘ *It hurt, it hurt!* Control yourself! *Let me go*. We are Grold.

I’m frightened! ’

Where the portal had passed there was now a gaping tunnel.

‘It’s Liz!’ said the Doctor. ‘She’s using the time shear effect about the periphery of the portal as a blade.’

‘And in the nick of time!’ commended the Brigadier. ‘If she can make the next pass a bit closer, we can get out of here before the hole has a

chance to close.'

'Unfortunately,' the Doctor snapped, pulling the radio from his pocket, 'it's the most foolish thing she could have done!'

The section reamed out of the metamorphosed ship erupted from the mouth of the imaging coil like toothpaste from a tube and slithered across the laboratory floor, almost knocking Osgood over as he leapt out of the way. The leading edge, a section of white painted bulwark, slid out through the interface bubble and down the pile of rubble beyond as Liz planned. But instead of following, the rest of the crumpled metal and wood broke free and ground to a sudden, unexpected halt.

Glowing veins pulsed through its length.

Then it started to writhe.

'Liz!' the Doctor's voice came out of the radio resting on the console. 'The whole ship is alive! Cutting it up may not kill it...'

Even as he spoke, metal tentacles were emerging from the sides of the cylindrical mass and oozing out towards Liz and Osgood. Although not directed by high intelligence in its partial form, it still had the same basic instinct to absorb and grow. Osgood, appalled at the consequences of his inspiration, snatched up a grenade from the box Mike had left.

'Don't use that in here!' cried Liz.

One of the thing's tentacles reached out and Osgood skipped aside, looking at her helplessly.

'But what can we do?'

Liz's brain raced. They dare not risk damage to the bridge, so they couldn't fight it inside the interface bubble, but what other choice was there? Unless...

'Outside!' she snapped at an astonished Osgood.

'But we can't exist for long –'

'I know. But it's the only chance we've got. Grab the grenade box and move!'

With a few last words shouted at the radio, Liz dived through the

interface bubble into the night and stumbled down the rubble slope after Osgood. Like a giant, ungainly worm, the thing followed them.

'We'll try to lure it outside and outsmart it,' Liz had shouted, then she was gone.

The Doctor stared at the radio in his hand in dismay, even as about him the ship recovered from the shock of losing part of itself. The spikes extended inward again.

He looked up into a ring of desperate faces. Even the Brigadier was looking at him expectantly – clearly ready to fight to the death, but hoping that he wouldn't have to. With the air of one playing the last card he held, the Doctor drew the remaining ampule from his pocket, twisted and pulled until the lid came free, then held it dramatically aloft.

'Release us or I'll use this!'

The spikes hesitated.

'Now! Withdraw! We've nothing to lose!'

Slowly the spines shrank a few feet, then halted.

'You do not know... *tell me, please*...what the serum will do,' rumbled Brokk–Nancy.

'I don't have to,' the Doctor countered. 'I saw how much the Semquess valued the ampules, but I wasn't quite sure about you. Now I know. And I suspect this ampule is the most valuable of them all. There only seems to be one dose in it. It must be very special.'

They felt the whole monstrous quasi-organism around them hesitate uncertainly.

'Or perhaps dangerous,' the Doctor suggested, tilting the ampule slightly. 'Shall I try some on you?'

'No!' the response was echoed by a cacophonous grating of beams and hull plates. 'You do not understand its power. It is death and life. Keep it away! It is the ultimate reward, if you have the strength to use it.'

The Doctor frowned at the intensity of the words. He tilted the ampule upright again.

And Brokk–Nancy laughed again. It was not a pleasant sound.

‘There, you dare not use it on me... *us*...for fear I might survive its effects. Maybe I shall take the risk... *No!* Though it is not in my plan, just to prove my... *our*...superiority. You cannot dispose of it within me... *us*. The only way of denying it to me is to take it yourself. But if you die you achieve nothing, and if you live you fear what it will make you, what lies beyond. I... *we*...see this through the woman’s... *Nancy, my name is*...eyes and mind, do not deny it. Even she... *Nancy*...did not fear power... *I could have been the greatest*...Go ahead.

Prove you are as strong as we.’

As the Doctor hesitated, the spikes resumed their inward advance. ‘So, you will all be absorbed,’ the ship boomed around them with awful finality.

Amelia Grover snatched the ampule from the Doctor’s hand.

Before they could stop her she had tipped it down her throat, then closed her eyes and clutched the tiny silver crucifix around her neck.

The ship reverberated with the ghost of Nancy’s voice.

‘ *You would do it! You would!* ’

The encroaching spikes suddenly recoiled, as though reflecting the cry of alarm. Grover clasped Amelia to him as she arched her back in a spasm of pain, her eyes opened wide in fear. Her lips moved as though she were trying to speak.

Then she slumped within his arms and was still. The Doctor reached over and felt for the pulse in her neck, then looked into Grover’s anguished eyes.

‘I’m so sorry...she’s dead.’

The worm-thing crashed across the ruins, starting minor avalanches of decaying bricks and rotting beams rolling down into what had been a London side-street, even as Liz and Osgood scrambled up the next pile of rubble. They were fifty yards from the lights of the lab, glowing within the interface bubble that sat amid the ruins like a misplaced Christmas tree bauble. They dare not go much further.

‘What are we doing, Miss Shaw?’ Osgood panted.

‘Looking for something.’

‘What?’

‘That!’ Liz pointed to the jagged remains of the side of a building, rising from the summit of the next hill of rubble.

‘Didn’t you ever read *Boy’s Own*? Come on!’

‘She’s dead? *Just to spite me*. It failed!’ boomed the ship’s voice.

Grover hugged Amelia’s body to him, rocking her back and forth like a child.

The spikes edged forward for the last time. Everybody beat against them with gun butts, broken furnishings, feet or bare hands. But they could not be stopped. Dodgeson cried out as a spine stabbed his flailing arm. Bell cursed, holding a hand to a gash on her thigh. In moments they would not be able to move without impaling themselves like so many butterflies in a display case.

It was strange, seconds from death as they were, that they all heard Grover’s sudden gasp of astonishment so clearly.

The worm-thing wriggled and clawed its way through the ruins, driven on by its basic urge to absorb and grow. It sensed one of the food sources had slowed down, allowing it to get closer. With a rippling surge and flailing of tentacles it closed in upon the creature as it cowered in a valley between the rubble heaps.

There was a multiple explosion.

Several tons of free-standing brickwork toppled over and smashed the worm-thing into the ground.

Osgood slithered down to join Liz and they edged past the remains of the thing. A pseudo-tentacle twitched from under the remains, but nothing else moved.

‘It worked!’ gasped Osgood.

‘It always did in *Boy’s Own*,’ said Liz. ‘Now let’s get back, there’s hardly any time left.’ They stumbled away towards the bubble of alternate reality that encompassed the laboratory and all that was left of their own world.

But as they ran, the dead landscape around them began to grow fainter and sounds receded.

Liz saw her hand grow pale, then the bones showed through. Osgood was fading too. The ground became rubbery, her pounding feet no longer gripping the surface but sliding through it. It was like some terrible dream where all action became futile and time clung ever tighter and heavier. Despite her efforts she was moving slower and slower. Just ten yards short and they were going to fade away, she thought, wanting to rage and cry out, but no longer having the strength. It was over. Well, they had done their best. There were probably worse ways to die. They collapsed as silent wraiths at the base of the last slope, sinking slightly into the uncaring earth.

Then a voice said: 'You can do it. Believe in yourself.'

It was a voice without doubt. Liz did not question where it came from, simply accepting certainty and hope in a few simple words. For a few seconds she *believed* more passionately than she had ever done, defying the forces that were erasing her very existence.

Yes, there was still traction to be found against the rough ground, if she dug deep enough, Liz decided. No, she was *not* going to fade away! She reached out and grasped Osgood's thinning arm and squeezed until he yelped in pain. And somehow they were hauling themselves up the pile of insubstantial rubble and clawing their way through the interface.

Reality hardened about them as they lay panting on the floor.

Liz desperately wanted to rest, to sleep, but she grasped the edge of the console and pulled herself upright, her eyes flashing immediately to the power gauge. There must only be seconds left.

It read full-charge.

As her dazed mind fumbled for some explanation, she saw movement through the imaging coil. The bridge was floating fifty yards from the ship now. Figures were pouring out on to the stern deck, while others climbed down into two lifeboats bobbing in the water. The Brigadier's voice came through on the radio.

'Miss Shaw! If you can hear this, pick us up *now*!'

The bridge seemed to steer more responsively and she drove it forward at top speed. As she did so, the light from the *Constitution*'s distorted portholes turned from red to white. It was as though a sun had ignited within it. Reflections glittered out across the dark ocean, brightening until beams of almost solid radiance cut through the air.

She had to squint and shield her eyes as she brought the portal over the twisted deck planks. The light shone through the coil, casting long shadows out through the interface and over the wasteland beyond. Then silhouettes eclipsed the light as the UNIT force scrambled back hastily through the portal.

'Get clear of the ship,' the Brigadier ordered crisply, the last to come through.

'What about the others?'

'They'll be all right,' the Doctor said reassuringly.

They swooped over the lifeboats manned by a handful of sailors, all rowing hard. In the first boat was a Chinese cook, Pascoe, Montgomery, Dodgeson and de Veer. In the second a maid, Miss Ellis and Marshal Grover, looking back at his abandoned yacht.

'Where's Amelia...and Nancy?' Liz asked in alarm.

With the oddest expression on his face, the Doctor said:

'Patience.'

Jagged tentacles, like those on the worm-thing, erupted from the sides of the yacht, further distorting its twisted lines, and flailed about wildly, slashing at the water. Then a pure white star rose from the tangled mass, growing into a radiant sphere of light. Spikes extended from the tentacles as they reached up to stab at the sphere, but it dodged them easily.

Red veins glowed all across the yacht and flowed together, concentrating into a ragged red eye. A beam of ruby light lashed upwards at the white sphere – and was absorbed as if it had never been.

Then the thing that had been the *Constitution* began to fold in upon itself, as though it was made of card and foil and was being crumpled up by some invisible hand. Pseudo-tentacles thrashed and flailed to no avail. It was moulded into a wrinkled ball twenty feet across, lifting out of the water as it did so. As it hung there its wrinkled surface distorted and rippled, and a face appeared on the side. It was a parody of Brokk's features, his single eye flickering feebly. The sphere turned slowly in the air, and they saw there was a second face on the other side. It was Nancy Grover's. Her mouth was opening and closing, but no sound came forth.

The sphere of light gently glided down to hang low over the lifeboats and their astonished passengers, only a few yards from the floating portal of the time bridge. The sphere distorted and flowed, resolving itself into a new form.

It was Amelia Grover.

They felt wonder, but no fear.

A glow still surrounded her. She was dressed in flowing white robes. White wings extended from her shoulders, beating slowly and gracefully. There was a perfectly serene smile on her face as she looked down at her father, and he in awe at her. Expressively she held out her hands to him.

Hands.

Liz realized her missing arm was now perfectly restored.

She spoke, and Liz knew where the voice that had urged her on amid the ruins had come from, though how she would never understand.

'Well, Pa,' Amelia said, smiling, 'I guess you got your way in the end, more or less. I'm all complete again. Poor Professor Sternberg, what would he think if he could see me now? You see, I was never destined to take his treatment after all, at least, not how he was planning it. The funny thing is it doesn't matter anymore. I can't quite explain, but this feels right. It was meant to be like this.'

Grover fought for words. 'Please...Come down now, Amy.'

A trace of sadness entered her voice. 'Sorry, Pa. There's a price. Like you always said in business, nothing's for free. To destroy evil I had to get on a higher plane, to go beyond earthly life – and there's no turning back. I can't stay. I don't belong here anymore.'

'No! Amy, you must stay – I love you!'

'Of course, Pa,' she said simply, 'I know that. And I love you and always will. But I've changed in ways you cannot imagine and I see now that things are more...complicated than I thought before. I feel I have a purpose, a duty, but I'm not sure what or where yet. I'll just have to find out for myself, I suppose. Don't worry, I'll take Nancy and Brokk with me. I guess I'm responsible for them. Maybe, when I learn more, they can be separated again.'

Grover slowly dropped his imploring arms and hung his head in mute despair.

'No, don't be sad for either of us, Pa,' Amelia insisted gently. 'This is simply the way it has to be. I'll be fine, and so will you. Please, Miss Ellis, look after him for me?'

The mousy secretary rallied magnificently, even though there were tears in her eyes. 'You know I will...Amelia.'

'And you'll all be picked up safely soon. There's a ship just an hour away. They believe they've just heard a radio distress call saying the *Constitution* is sinking from that tidal wave. There have been – casualties. I think that's the best story to tell.'

Grover, beyond words, nodded dumbly. Miss Ellis took his hand. Amelia smiled at them, and then across at the other boat.

De Veer managed a dazed but understanding smile in return. Dodgeson was absently feeling for a camera about his neck that was no longer there. He realized what he was doing and suddenly grinned ruefully. Montgomery threw a practised wave of farewell that was half a salute.

'Be a *real* star, kid,' he said.

Amelia turned to where the Doctor was standing in the mouth of the portal, and regarded him with a kindly, curious intensity.

'Now that I can see you properly for what you are,' she said, 'I think you understand why I'm leaving like this. We are a little alike now, Doctor. We both have a destiny not entirely of our own choosing, and much work to do. We may meet again, somewhere, someday. Until then, thank you, and goodbye.'

'Goodbye, Amelia, and good luck,' he replied.

'And goodbye to you, Liz Shaw, and especially to you, Mike. I'll never forget how you saved me from the spider in the pit.'

Mike, standing beside the Doctor, managed a wave, but could find no words to say.

Amelia dipped low over the lifeboats, touched her father's head with a kiss, smiled at Miss Ellis, then rose upward, dissolving once more into a simple sphere of light as she went.

The grey ball that was Brokk–Nancy ascended with her. The two dwindled rapidly in the night, up through a rift in the volcanic clouds, and disappeared in the glittering heavens beyond.

During the long silence that followed, the lifeboats drifted gently away into the night. On the distant horizon, the lights of a ship appeared.

In the remains of the laboratory, the Doctor stepped over to the control console and solemnly shut down the power to the time bridge. The image in the portal vanished as the door to the past closed. For a moment the interface bubble shimmered, then expanded out of sight, sweeping out across the ruined world.

And reality shifted for the last time.

Twenty-Six

he familiar lights of London twinkled through the la

T boratory windows. The UNIT building, whole and complete once more, buzzed with its usual activity. The Doctor and Liz sat drinking army-strength tea, while the Brigadier spoke on the phone.

'Yes, sir, not a fresh sighting or unusual incident reported anywhere for over an hour...I hope so too, but actually I wanted to tell you...What?' The Brigadier raised an ironic eyebrow in the direction of the Doctor and Liz, then seemed to hesitate before saying: 'Yes, isn't it *remarkable* how these things sometimes work out all by themselves...Naturally, we'll stay on alert for a few days...Goodbye, sir.'

The Brigadier replaced the receiver and turned back to the scientists with a curious expression on his face.

'Oh, well, he'll just have to read my report, like the rest of them. Though how I'm going to explain it all I don't know.

Odd thing. Scobie seemed rather vague about what had been going on, yet he was quite well informed before.'

'Because now it never happened, Brigadier,' the Doctor replied genially.

'Don't talk nonsense, Doctor. Of course it did. People actually died.'

'Their deaths will be put down to other causes. The impossible

illusions will be forgotten. The nexus is closed, at least as far as we are concerned, and history is tying up the loose ends. In a few days all the sightings and the ghosts from the past that never was will seem like a bad dream. Even the physical evidence will adjust to accommodate a slightly modifed reality.'

He held out a copy of the press cutting from Canberra. The Brigadier glanced over it:

MILLIONAIRE'S YACHT SUNK BY PACIFIC

VOLCANO!

...among those lost in this terrible tragedy were Marshal Grover's wife – the famous screen actress Nancy Norton –

and Amelia Grover, Mr Grover's daughter from his first marriage...

'It's changed again!' the Brigadier exclaimed.

'That is now the correct history for this timeline.'

'But, does this mean we'll forget what happened as well?'

'No, we were part of it. We passed along both alternate loops of time and through the nexus. But you may save yourself the trouble of writing that report. Nobody will believe a word of it.'

As the Brigadier considered this novel suggestion, Yates and Benton re-entered the room.

'All injuries seen to, and other personnel and equipment all present and correct, sir,' Mike reported with satisfaction.

'Good. At least something is as it should be. No problems with explaining the disruption?'

'They didn't even know they'd been gone, sir,' Benton said with a sigh. 'Just saw the lights flicker for a moment.'

'I see. Well, you'd better take yourselves off duty. You deserve it, both of you.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Mike. 'But there is one thing I'd like to ask the Doctor first.'

The Doctor smiled enquiringly at him. Mike suddenly looked

uncomfortable.

‘About what happened to Amelia Grover in the end. What we saw. I mean, did she actually become – an *angel*?’

‘Yes, Doctor,’ agreed the Brigadier. ‘The most extraordinary thing of all, and you haven’t explained it. Makes one wonder what was in that last ampule. It wasn’t an illusion, was it?’

‘No, it all happened as you saw it.’

Mike frowned. ‘But, if she actually became an angel, does that mean there really is a –’

‘Faith, Mike. That is real. She had a boundless reserve of faith and belief, and the drug she took released it and gave it form. It must have been the most potent pantropic formulation the Semquess have ever created. No wonder they wanted it recovered or destroyed. I really must have a word with the Time Lord High Council about them, when we get back on speaking terms again. Anyway, the drug allowed a mind to totally re-shape its body. Psychic regenerative transformation.

But only if the mind was *totally* free first, and the only means to achieve such a release was through death. Taking the drug would be a tremendous gamble, because it requires great strength of will to survive such an experience. Naturally for Amelia, with her strong religious convictions, to go beyond death meant becoming an “angel”, and they, as we know, are traditionally supposed to possess remarkable capabilities. The energy required to sustain such abilities does exist naturally, and she can now instinctively draw upon it and channel it as she desires. What Amelia will do next, I’m not sure. But, I can think of few people I’d rather trust with such power, can you?’

‘No,’ agreed Mike, quietly, ‘I can’t.’

‘I do feel sorry for her poor father,’ Liz said.

‘His loss, Liz, but the universe’s greater gain. We can only hope he will take some small comfort in that.’

There was a contemplative silence, and a slow shuffling of feet as they prepared to move. Then the Brigadier paused.

‘Oh, yes. Doctor, Miss Shaw. There *was* something I wanted to say to you, and I’d better do it now, just in case I forget.’

‘There’s no danger of that, Brigadier,’ the Doctor said quickly. ‘Tomorrow will do.’

‘Nevertheless,’ the Brigadier persisted, ‘I just wanted to say – thank you, for all you’ve done.’

There was an apprehensive pause.

‘That’s all?’ said Liz, cautiously.

‘ *And,* ’ the Brigadier continued forcefully, ‘to point out to you, Doctor, that this is the second time your improvised time machines have landed you in serious trouble! Don’t make it a case of third time *unlucky*. The sooner you stop messing about with these Heath-Robinson contraptions and get your TARDIS working properly again, the better! Do I make myself perfectly clear?’

They held their breath, expecting some protest or sharp riposte from the Doctor. Instead he replied, almost meekly:

‘You know, my dear Lethbridge-Stewart, I think you may be absolutely right!’

Document Outline

- Front cover
- Rear cover
- Title page
- Copyright
- Contents
- Prologue
- Chapter One
- Chapter Two
- Chapter Three
- Chapter Four
- Chapter Five
- Chapter Six
- Chapter Seven
- Chapter Eight
- Chapter Nine
- Chapter Ten
- Chapter Eleven
- Chapter Twelve
- Chapter Thirteen
- Chapter Fourteen
- Chapter Fifteen
- Chapter Sixteen
- Chapter Seventeen
- Chapter Eighteen
- Chapter Nineteen
- Chapter Twenty
- Chapter Twenty-One
- Chapter Twenty-Two
- Chapter Twenty-Three
- Chapter Twenty-Four
- Chapter Twenty-Five
- Chapter Twenty-Six

Table of Contents

Prologue
One
Two
Three
Four
Five
Six
Seven
Eight
Nine
Ten
Eleven
Twelve
Thirteen
Fourteen
Fifteen
Sixteen
Seventeen
Eighteen
Nineteen
Twenty
Twenty-One
Twenty-Two
Twenty-Three
Twenty-Four
Twenty-Five
Twenty-Six